

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 50:4-9

SECOND LESSON: Mark 8:27-38

September 15, 2024

### ***“Losing Life to Save It”***

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The way the prosperity gospel preachers tell it, following Jesus is like winning the lottery. God only wants the best for us and that means God rewards with riches. Abundant life means prosperity and ease, health and happiness. Just send in \$100 as a sign of your faith and God will reward you with \$500! These insidious messages are found not just in America, but around the world. Africa is beset by endless prosperity gospel charlatans. They are found in South America and Asia too. And just why is this egregious distortion of Christianity so popular? Because it tells us what we want to hear. It tells us that greed is good, and that God wants our lives to be comfortable and materially prosperous. Listening to Jesus we get a very different message, and if we are honest, a frightening one.

Jesus begins by asking, “Who do people say that I am?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” These were not illogical conclusions. Maybe John the Baptist was alive. Clearly Jesus acted like a prophet. He spoke boldly and performed miracles. He must be a prophet! But no one at that point said, “the Messiah.” No one except Peter.

Jesus did not fit the most popular ideas about the Messiah prevalent in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The dominant understanding of the Messiah was one of political and military conquest. The Messiah would be David’s successor. The Messiah would drive out the Romans and re-establish Israel’s glory. The Messiah would usher in a golden age. The popular viewpoint was a lot like the prosperity gospel in its message. It was all about military and economic power. But Jesus chose a different model from the scriptures to describe the ministry of the Messiah. Jesus chose the image of the suffering servant.

Jesus did not refer to himself as the Messiah as he spoke here. He chose the more ambiguous title, the Son of Man. And he began to systematically teach in very plain language that the Son of Man must suffer many things, 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. This was most definitely NOT in line with the military and economic aspirations of most of the people. This platform would win no votes. No one would be attracted to this as a way of life. Clearly what Jesus said freaked Peter out, because Peter then took it upon himself to rebuke Jesus. It did not go well. Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Get

behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Peter may have meant well, but he was encouraging Jesus to side-step the cross. In this sense friends with good intentions can sometimes be more dangerous than enemies, because we're much more likely to listen to a friendly voice telling us we don't have to do something hard that we in fact know we do have to do. We wouldn't listen to an enemy telling us to take an easier path. Only a friend could make that argument. So Jesus rebukes Peter. The temptation to take the easier softer way must be cut off at the pass. There can be no room for it.

Jesus knows that Peter's problem is not that he is evil, but that he sees things only in a human way. He says, "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." And then he begins an even harder teaching, saying, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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 Jesus told the disciples cuts directly across instinct. It goes against a basic part of human nature. The desire to save our lives is instinctual. It is even God-given. Without a will to survive the human race would not have managed to do so. We know how important a will to live is when fighting illness. But to be truly human goes beyond the animal instincts of survival. To be human as God wants us to be human is to be able to transcend those instincts and act out of love. To be truly human is to do the right thing, not necessarily the thing that will directly benefit me. But many of us don't achieve this higher level, and instead operate out of animal instincts. Animals destroy the weaker members of their community. A fox with mange will be driven out of the community and left to die on its own. Humans bully those deemed weak, forcing them into isolation, cutting them off from life with others. In the animal kingdom it is survival of the fittest, and any difference is viewed as a potential threat. Humans reject those who are different and persecute minorities. Different equals bad. It is not a rational response. It is animal survival response. When we see this type of behavior among humans we see the lowest form of humanity, not the highest. Fear of those who are different because they are different is part of our reptilian brain, not our higher nature. Jesus tells us that in order to become who God created us to be we are to do the exact opposite of what our animal nature tells us to do. Jesus tells us it is God first, others second and survival last. Only when we give up fighting for our life will truly we find it.

All of the disciples, including Peter, had given up a lot to follow Jesus. They had watched as small crowds grew to larger and larger crowds. They had witnessed miracles. They could see a great future! And we're no different. What does success look like? It looks like large numbers, prosperity, being honored and respected. It looks like being on the winning team. We're hard-wired for it. All of our businesses and sports teams aim for it. Nobody competes to lose. This is why forms of religion that promise prosperity and comfort are popular. People don't line up for suffering and death. Generally speaking there would be something wrong with us if we did. But there are rare times when suffering and

death is the better or best option available, if doing anything else would mean turning our back on God and others.

What does it mean for us to take up our cross? Taking up our cross is different from putting up with a challenging person or circumstance. It is not the same thing as enduring cancer or tragedy or temptation. These things happen in the Christian life. But the cross is different. To take up our cross is to be willing to endure the persecution that comes from opposing the powerful when the powerful are wrong. Martin Luther King Jr. and others in the Civil Rights Movement took up their cross. Nelson Mandela in South Africa took up his cross. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis just weeks before Hitler fell, took up his cross. The young adults from the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida took up their cross following the attack and many have not put it down. They did not choose it, but they also did not run away from it. When we take up our cross we die to our own agenda, face insurmountable opposition, and serve God by doing the right thing no matter what.

There is a clear warning in the words Jesus spoke. "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." In some places in the world, people do die for their faith. The death penalty for converting to Christianity in many conservative Muslim nations is still carried out. The charge is apostasy. More Christians died for their faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century than in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is busy catching up. But even when following Jesus doesn't mean actual death, we should be willing to go to that point if necessary. This is hard, and I'm not sure if any of us know how we would respond if faced with this choice. Without God giving us the strength I don't think we could do it. But we start doing it in the now, in our mundane daily lives, putting God first, others second, and ourselves last. When Jesus is in control our lives are in balance, and when and if we are called to take a stand that is hard, to oppose injustice and speak out, we will be given the strength to do so. Amen.

Isaiah 50:4-9

<sup>4</sup> The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue,  
to know the word that sustains the weary.

He wakens me morning by morning,  
wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

<sup>5</sup> The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears;  
I have not been rebellious,  
I have not turned away.

<sup>6</sup> I offered my back to those who beat me,  
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;  
I did not hide my face  
from mocking and spitting.

<sup>7</sup> Because the Sovereign Lord helps me,  
I will not be disgraced.

Therefore have I set my face like flint,

and I know I will not be put to shame.  
<sup>8</sup> He who vindicates me is near.  
Who then will bring charges against me?  
Let us face each other!  
Who is my accuser?  
Let him confront me!  
<sup>9</sup> It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.  
Who will condemn me?  
They will all wear out like a garment;  
the moths will eat them up.

Mark 8:27-38

<sup>27</sup> Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

<sup>28</sup> They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

<sup>29</sup> “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

<sup>30</sup> Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

<sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

<sup>33</sup> 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.”

<sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. <sup>36</sup> What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? <sup>37</sup> Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? <sup>38</sup> 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.”