

September 3, 2023

St. Matthew 16:24-28:

“Is This Journey Really Necessary?”

- I. Do We Have to Bear the Cross?
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St. Matthew 16:24-28

Dear Friends in Christ,

Please forgive me, but this text reminded of that old story about a pastor who spent a night in a couple's home out in the country. He was awakened the next morning by the singing of the hostess. She was singing, "Nearer My God, To Thee". At breakfast he mentioned how nice it was to wake up to the singing of a Christian hymn. "Oh," she replied, "that's the hymn I boil the eggs by; three verses for soft and five for hard."

Does it ever get that commonplace for us? Does it ever become, "the same old, same old?" We're often looking for something new and exciting. And there they are, right in our faces, the words of Solomon:

All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl.1:8,9).

And these words of Jesus are not strange to our hearing: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart I have overcome the world (Jn.16:22)." We know that Jesus walked the sinless life for us. We know He suffered God's wrath and the hell we deserve. We know He overcame death and earned eternal life for us. We hear this every Sunday in this sanctuary. But there are those troubling words to the flesh: "In the world you will have tribulation." And so, the question . . .

IS THIS JOURNEY REALLY NECESSARY?

I. Do We Have to Bear the Cross?

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul (vv.24-26)."

Those who go after Jesus will take up a cross, will experience unwanted consequences. If we know Scripture, we know why. It's what Jesus said to his brothers: "The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil (Jn.7:7)." Its works focus on what it wants, not what God wants.

Have you ever noted the direction in which the world walks? Have you really considered the constant upheavals that make up every drop of its history?? Have you ever considered how many burial plots there might be throughout the whole world? Take a casual walk through a cemetery. It's simple: "The wages of sin is death (Rm.6:23a)." The world doesn't want to hear that.

Let's at least face it honestly: If we can get overly comfortable with this world then our walk with the Lord will become alarmingly skewed. Let's face it, in Christ we do bear a cross. And that brings us to these words of our text . . .

II. Getting Ready.

"For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done (v.27)." Jesus is not saying our good works will pay for our sin and earn heaven. That's what He did for us. We know that. There's another Scripture we know ever so well: "For by grace you have been saved through faith . And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, **not a result of works**, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8,9)."

We know that works are the evidence of the faith we profess. Surely we remember Jesus' words? We should have them memorized: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent (Jn 6:29)."

The point is, Jesus is going to return. The point is, this world is coming to its end. We can't ignore the words of Jesus: "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short (Mt.24:21,22)." *Days cut short.* You do know that we're not that far away from another Advent and Christmas, right?

Brothers and sisters, you and I cannot afford - ever - to put anyone or anything above God's love in Christ. There's a reason why God had Paul write, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil...(Eph.6:11)." We're battling with what's behind and moving human forces, as Paul says, "... (we wrestle) against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12b)." - Satan and his minions. But there is another aspect to this journey . . .

III. The Journey's End.

Our text closes with these words from Jesus: "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom (v.28)." *The some standing here* were Peter, James, and John who would be standing in the coming kingdom at the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Of the Transfiguration Matthew reports: "...he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light (Mt. 17:2)." They saw it.

It was about 42 years ago when a 14 year old girl, a Lutheran Christian, was brought to the Intensive Care Unit of St. Mary's Hospital from a community south of Decatur. Her pastor called Pilgrim and asked if we would visit with her. I stated we would be blessed to do so. The girl was suffering from cystic fibrosis.

I recently read that "Just three decades ago (30 years ago), the average person with cystic fibrosis lived only to the age of 30, but now 50 years is typical, and some patients ...live into their 80's." Our setting with this girl was about 42 years ago. There was no such lengthy life span for her time. We understood the seriousness of her situation. The fact is, it was very critical.

I have never forgotten when I walked into her room. It seemed there was every kind of IV bag with fluids dripping into her veins; tubes everywhere. She was wearing a clear oxygen mask and there was a large, noisy vibrating machine designed to loosen the build-up of mucus in her lungs.

The moment that really tore into my heart was right after I introduced myself. She had this huge smile on her face, her eyes sparkled, she immediately expressed how happy she was to see me and, above all else, expressed her love and thankfulness for Jesus in her life! The pastors experienced that every time we went to see her. She was truly a very lovely, spiritual girl. She was truly a powerful witness. She was a wonderful example of this Word of God from St. Peter: "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Pt.1:8,9)."

As I recall, this little sister was in the ICU for a little over one week. We saw her every day; several times more than once on the same day. I have never forgotten the day I walked into the ICU and was greeted by one of the nurses we got to know. I could see it on her face. The Lord had mercifully taken this little sister home to Heaven.

IV. Is This Journey Really Necessary?

Before His crucifixion, Jesus said to the disciples and, consequently to us as we consider our journey through this world, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you (Jn.14:27a)." The peace the world gives is, at best, sporadic. It's constantly interrupted by catastrophe and death, and that includes the conflict it has with those who hold to God's Word. We do bear our crosses.

Jesus went on to say, "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid (Jn.25:27b)." The peace Jesus gives is forgiveness of sin and the promise of everlasting life through Christ, as He said, "I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also (Jn.14:3b)." He doesn't promise that our journey through this world will be easy. As it was for the 14 year old sister in Christ, He promises to see us through. It is as the Proverbs say, "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good (15:3)." And it would be a continual source of strength to have these words of David in front of us:

The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous (the people of God through faith in Christ) and his ear toward their cry. The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all (Ps.34:15-19).

Is this journey really necessary? It is - but never without the love and purpose of God in Christ; never without a witness to others; never without the promise of eternal life.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott