

“THE SON OF MAN MUST SUFFER”

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 14, 1969 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

There are a number of passages in the New Testament which are disturbing to me. Some of these are passages whose meaning I cannot understand, passages like those in the figurative section of the book of Revelation. Even more disturbing are some of the passages which I do understand. These are passages which teach something which neither I nor most of my Christian friends have yet been able to achieve. Such a passage is the final paragraph in the eighth chapter of the book of Mark. It is deeply disturbing to the thoughtful reader.

This passage comes immediately after the incident of Christ walking with his disciples into Caesarea Philippi, on which occasion he asked, “Who do men say that I am? And they told him, saying, John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but others, one of the prophets. And he asked them, But who say ye that I am? Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ.” (Mark 8:27-29). After this pinnacle experience in which God revealed to Peter that Jesus was the Messiah or Savior, the text of this hour is given.

“And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, and the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he spake the saying openly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But he turning about, and seeing his disciples, rebuked Peter, and saith, Get thee behind me, Satan; for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men. And he called unto him the multitude with his disciples, and said unto them, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's shall save it. For what doth it profit a man, to gain the whole world, and forfeit his life? For what should a man give in exchange for his life? For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of man also shall be ashamed of him, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, There are some here of them that stand [by], who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God come with power.” (Mark 8:31-9:1).

A New Conception

This passage of scripture, emphasizing as it does that Jesus would suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and that he would be killed by them, presents a picture of a suffering Messiah which was so utterly foreign to all of their conceptions of the Messiah that only the most explicit declaration would induce them to accept it. For generations the Jews had dreamed of the time when a conquering, triumphant Messiah would come and break the yoke of Roman oppression and send the legions of Rome back to their own shores. Christ had previously told them something of his future suffering, but never so clearly as in this passage. Only after they knew that he was the Christ would he safely reveal his future suffering.

We are so accustomed to thinking of Christ as the suffering Savior, that we find it difficult to understand that the disciples of the Lord did not have a clear conception of what Jesus would do. It is difficult for us to imagine them think of him as a conquering, triumphant hero type Messiah in view of some of the Old Testament prophecies. For example, Isaiah had written, “He was despised, and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and as one from whom men hide their face he was despised; and we esteemed him not.” (Is. 53:3). Yet, in spite of passages like this, the desire of their hearts led the Jewish people to think of Jesus not as he declared himself to be, but as they wished him to be. I

It seems that the disciples still had worldly ambitions or carnal expectations. As a result our text says, “And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him.” Although the words that Peter used are not given, the idea is clearly suggested that he began to scold the Lord, telling him that none of these things would happen to him, that his disciples would loyally stand and defend him, and that they would never allow him to suffer and be killed. It seemed so impossible to Peter that the Messiah would be mistreated in this manner, because he had so deeply believed that when the Christ should come he would be a conquering hero.

Immediately, however, the tables are turned. “But he (Christ) turning about, and seeing his disciples, rebuked Peter, and saith, Get thee behind me, Satan; for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men.” Notice that Christ here uses very strong language, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” These were the same words which he used when he was tempted in the wilderness and Satan came in bodily form to tempt him. Matt. 16:23, which tells this same story, adds Christ’s comment, “Thou art a stumbling block unto me.” Sometimes our well-meaning friends are actually Satan’s spokesmen. Without intending to do so, they give us the wrong advice.

“Deny” and “Take Up His Cross”

The primary message of this whole passage comes in verse 34 of Mark 8: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” The two key expressions, of course, are “deny” and “take up his cross.” Denying oneself does not mean the giving up of some enjoyable practice or prized possession. It is deeper than that. It means much more than using the family

automobile for another year; or going without meat one day in the week. It is not so much denying some choice pleasure as it is denying oneself. This means that the Christian must renounce himself, abstaining from everything that stands in the way of duty. It means a total surrender of one's self to God. It means that the Christian's will, his affections, his life-purposes, and his body and soul are dedicated to God.

Taking up one's cross means much more than bearing some physical ailment or facing some family problem. Oftentimes we speak of bearing a cross then it is no more than arthritis, or when it is disappointment in connection with one's working conditions, or some other undesirable situation or problem. That is not what is meant here. The cross that Jesus would have us bear involves the committing of our lives to accomplish some purpose which he sets before us. It means tackling some work, lining up with some cause, putting our shoulder to the wheel in some important undertaking--all of which are done because of our loyalty to Christ.

Just here we see our problem. During the centuries, and especially in our time, Christianity has become quite respectable and quite common. As it is practiced in our land today, it is cheerful, sensible, comfortable, placid, and cheap. It doesn't cost very much in time, or in money, or in depth of commitment. It is a watered-down kind of Christianity. It involves going to a place of worship with some degree of regularity, taking part in some religious exercises, and living a reasonably decent life. But, and here is the real point, it does not require the central loyalty of one's life. And herein is its failure. Real Christianity demands two things: self-denial, by which we mean a willingness to part with all earthly comforts and temporal enjoyments, if that is God's will. It means bringing one's own wishes into complete subjection to those of God. It also requires service, by which we mean that each person will take up his cross and follow in the steps of Jesus. It involves self-denial on the deepest level and service to God and his Cause as the central work of one's life.

Had we lived in the long ago we might on some occasion have faced the very concrete, specific challenge of having to renounce our Lord or die. I have no doubt that all of us would have had the inner spiritual strength to rise to the occasion and that we would have gladly forfeited life rather than renounce our Lord. However, our 20th century task is more difficult. We live in the richest most materialistic age of the world's history, and even though our intentions and desires are to let the spiritual be the center of our existence, our determinations are eroded away day by day as we are surrounded by the materialism of our age. Ours is a more difficult task because the temptations come so gradually, so insidiously, and so constantly. May we somehow realize the encroaching danger and tear ourselves free from bondage to the materialism of the age which constitutes the greatest danger to the finest people on earth today.

Other Scriptures

There are many other scriptures that emphasize this depth of commitment as a central part of real Christianity. For example, in Phil. 2:5-9, the apostle Paul writes, "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross." Notice the key expressions "emptied himself," "form of a servant," and "humbled himself." These same qualities we must emulate in our lives if we are to follow our Lord.

In Hebrews 5:8, we find this very suggestive thought, "Though he was a Son, yet learned obedience by the things which he suffered." In II Tim. 3:12, there is this further disturbing passage, "Yea, and all that would live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." We also remember the words of the Lord to the preacher Ananias concerning Saul of Tarsus, "Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake." (Acts 9: 15-16). Later, we read Paul's own statement concerning his sufferings, "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of rivers, in perils of robbers, in perils from my countrymen, in perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in labor and travail, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness." (II Cor. 11:24-27).

In trying to get a clear understanding of what it means to follow Jesus in the way he wants us to follow him, we can do no better than look at the example of Saul of Tarsus. Here was a brilliant young Jewish lawyer, who had been highly trained, and who had stretching out before him a very promising career among his people. Yet, when he came to believe in Jesus as the Savior, he changed the course of his entire life. Instead of great prominence among his people, with high acclaim and material success, he became an itinerant preacher of the gospel of Christ, having no home nor permanent abiding place. As he says it, "Howbeit what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ." (Phil. 3:7) Even more meaningful as a kind of summary statement of his changed life are these words, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that liveth, but Christ liveth in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me." (Gal. 2:20). This is Christian commitment of the kind and depth that our Lord desires from each of us,

We sometimes sing the hymn:

Mast I be carried to the skies

On flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize,
And sailed through bloody seas?

Sure I must fight in Jesus' name,
Increase my courage, Lord;
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by Thy word.

We are tempted in our age to accept all the blessings of Christianity and to offer so little of ourselves that we can hardly be called the same kind of Christians as those of the early generations when Christianity cost life and possessions.

Antithesis

In the other verses of our text there is a sharp antithesis. Jesus said, "For whosoever shall save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's shall save it." This was literally true at the time in which it was written. Those who renounced Christ actually saved their physical lives when their persecutors descended upon them, Those who remained loyal to Christ were condemned and executed. However, those who saved their physical lives lost their spiritual lives. Those who lost their physical lives saved their spiritual lives. The emphasis here is very sharp and very clear. Those who hold on to the material, earthly things of life, expecting to have all that earth can offer and then heaven, too, are to be disappointed. Those who place primary emphasis, on the other hand, on spiritual values, allowing the things of this world to follow far in the background, will ultimately know the eternal joys of heaven. It is either a life centered upon the spiritual values, or a life bound up with the temporary, physical things of existence. Each of us must choose where he wishes to place his heart. As our text goes on to its conclusion it emphasizes that the one who confesses Christ will be confessed eternally, while the one who denies Christ by his disinterested life will be denied at the Judgment.

Conclusion

Recently a young man of college age was talking with me about a family who had lived quite luxuriously, surrounding themselves with even more than the usual physical abundance. They have also stood quite high in economic and social circles. His comment was "It is easy for people to forget their principles, isn't it?" This is not only their problem but the problem that all of us constantly face. Our principles include, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world." (1 John 2:15). "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." (Luke 12:15). "But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matt. 6:33). But how difficult it is for us to remember these principles as we live our lives in this modern opulent, luxurious age.

So many of us want this world and heaven, too. Lot's wife lost everything because she tried to hold onto the world. We must not make her mistake. May we give ourselves without reservation to God. May we love him with heart, soul, mind and strength.