

“The Concerns of God”

Introduction: Last week, in our encounters with Jesus, we met a man who was deaf and barely able to talk. Jesus opened his ears and loosened his tongue, ministering to him both emotionally and physically, and pointing to the hearing of his word and sharing of his grace that we need his enabling power to do.

As Jesus and his disciples walk on, they encounter a blind man who we will see Jesus need to heal in two stages. It’s indicative, as Mark lays it out for us, of the process both the crowds and the disciples needed to go through in order to see clearly what it means to call Jesus Messiah. As we fall into step with him today, do we see clearly who he says he is – a King who is headed to a cross? And, do we see clearly that he is calling us to a cross, too? [READ]

I. The process of seeing.

A. Still moving in and around the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and his followers arrived at its north shore town – Bethsaida – where they were met by another group of friends who had brought someone they cared about to Jesus, begging for healing (cf. 7:31-32). This healing seems to take more than its usual effort. After his first touch Jesus checks in with the man, and though there has been some success, the man still cannot see clearly. People look like trees walking. So Jesus gives the man a second touch, his eyes were opened, his sight restored, and he saw everything clearly. There is healing here to be sure. But the emphasis seems to be more on the fact that seeing clearly in this case didn’t happen in an instant but involved a process.

B. The need for a process continues to be the focus as Jesus and his disciples continue on to the very northern tip of Palestine to a place called Caesarea Philippi. This town had been the focus of pagan worship for centuries, and it was here that Herod the Great had built a huge, gleaming marble temple in honor of the Roman emperor, who many considered a god. When the group reached this pagan outpost, Jesus asked a question, “Who do people say I am?” It seems that Jesus wanted his followers center in on who the true God is, before heading south to Jerusalem and the final events of his life.

C. In response, the disciples offered that Jesus was still showing pretty well in recent polls. While there were some who still thought he was in cahoots with Satan, or out of his mind, or just an ordinary bloke from Nazareth, most held that he was a preparatory, messenger-like figure, the next in a long line of famous names, like John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets whose job was to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah, the long-anticipated coming king. This king was expected to gather a military force to defeat evil, get rid of the Roman occupying forces, and put the Gentiles in their place.

D. Jesus took all that in and then made the question personal: “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” Peter hit the buzzer and shouted out the answer: “You are the Messiah.” In other words: You, Jesus, are the man. You are not a preparatory messenger-like figure, you are the one we have all been preparing for. Well, it appeared that Peter got the answer right, but did he? The fact is that, like the blind man Jesus had healed back in Bethsaida, Peter wasn’t seeing clearly yet. It was going to be a process. It’s why Jesus had to warn him to keep quiet. Yes, Jesus was the Messiah, but

his job description was going to be far different than what Peter had hoped for or imagined. Jesus was indeed a king, but he was a king who would be heading to a cross and calling his people to follow.

E. How do we know that Peter, along with others, was not yet seeing Jesus clearly? Because when Jesus went on to lay out his cross-focused job description – that he must suffer, be rejected, be killed, and then rise again – Peter pulled a nutty! He took Jesus aside and rebuked him, he gave him a strong scolding. Can you imagine?! Why was Peter so scandalized? What Jesus had done was to link “Son of Man” and “must suffer.” Son of man sometimes refers to a human being but can also be a divine figure, found in a vision of Daniel’s, who was going to come with all of his heavenly hosts and set everything back right in the world (Da. 7:13-14):

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

This is a title, and an authority, Jesus applies to himself, and that’s well and good and a figure Peter would have been expecting since Sunday school. But then Jesus throws the curve. By adding “must suffer” to his job description, he brings in Isaiah 53 and the picture of a suffering servant (53:3-5):

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. . . he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Though it wasn’t clear who specifically Isaiah was referring to when he wrote, Jesus applies it to himself. And Peter wasn’t happy because in his mind, any Messiah that allowed himself to suffer and just gave himself up had to be a false Messiah. No self-respecting king would go down without a fight, would he? It would be like the new Patriot hopeful, Drake Maye, saying that he had to begin each game by throwing five interceptions. What?! Jesus was explaining to his disciples that he would not be going to Jerusalem to celebrate but to become a sacrifice; he would not be taking control but giving it up; he would not be sitting on a throne but strung up on a cross. He was not going to win he was going, apparently, to lose.

F. So, Jesus turned around and rebuked Peter because behind it all Jesus sensed the work of Satan, the same evil power that tried, through the temptations he sent Jesus’ way in the desert, to get Jesus to skip the sacrificial, suffering on the cross part of his mission. But Jesus was having none of it. He had come to defeat evil by absorbing it all upon himself. His resurrection would verify that what he had done on the cross was the first step in his making all things new.

II. The process of following.

A. Importantly, as Jesus goes on, he wants his listeners to know that the cross is not just something we’re to look at. Nor is it to simply provide us with forgiveness of sin and a ticket to eternity. The cross is not a transaction; it lays out a lifestyle. It highlights a victory we are to live out, a victory Jesus calls us to implement as we follow him. As he *must* suffer and *must* be killed, we

must deny ourselves and take up our cross. There is no option, not only for him, but also for us, if we want to be part of living the life that is truly life, making all things new. What does that look like?

1. Jesus uses the term “disciple” to describe it. A disciple is not a part-time volunteer, but a learner, one who is growing, like an apprentice, to become more and more like Jesus. The term Christian is in fact only used three times in the Bible and two of those are used almost disparagingly by opponents of Jesus. Disciple is the primary identity of one who seeks to walk in step with Jesus. As we’ve defined it (by our elevator and bathroom doors): “A disciple is one who turns to Jesus in repentance and faith and who intentionally enters into a life-long apprentice relationship with him, for the sake of others.”

2. It’s not an option. A disciple is not a special or elite class of Christian for those who want to put in a little extra effort. Jesus is not only speaking to his disciples but to the crowd, who he intentionally calls to join them in hearing what he has to say. It’s a call on all Jesus followers.

3. Denying ourselves and taking up our cross involves saying, as it did for Jesus, “Not my will, heavenly Father, but your will be done.” So, it’s the way of loving, sacrificial service. It’s the path on which we learn to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, love our enemy, and forgive those who have wronged us. It involves “working out” our salvation by means of spiritual disciplines, practices that make space for grace, for the Holy Spirit to work so that the life of Jesus can take shape within us as we leave vices and “acts of the flesh” and take on virtues and the fruit of the Spirit, as Paul describes it in his letters. In the end, living such a cross-empowered life is the way we both find, and bring the life that is truly life.

B. A professor of evangelism at Fuller Seminary, Soong-Chan Rah, puts some arms and legs on this cross-centered life in an article in the recent issue of *Sojourners* (“Can U.S. Evangelicals Lay Down Power, Not Seek More of It?”). He asks: How did the early church grow? What can we observe about how the church went about implementing the victory Jesus won over sin, evil and death? Many notice the powerful proclamation by Peter and others as they shared the good news about Jesus. But Rah also points out that equally important, and perhaps even necessary to gain a hearing, is the self-sacrificial life that the early church lived. Acts 2:44-45 describes it:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Rah observes that instead of seeking their own betterment, or using the power of the purse to gain and exercise authority or political status, God’s people laid down their power – their material possessions and wealth – so that those who were without could be lifted to life. He wonders: What would it mean for the church in the 21st c., which has taken some hits, to use its power defend and care for widows, orphans, refugees, and immigrants, and other outcasts, in the name of Jesus? Could a sacrificial, cross-centered life, one that not only proclaims but demonstrates the gospel as it follows its king to the cross, help make the church great again?