

Well, that didn't take long. Jesus had just said, "Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, you are Peter, or Rocky, because what you just said about me, that I'm the Son of the Living God and the Messiah, is the rock on which my Church will be built." And it took about 5 verses for Peter to mess it up and get called "Satan" by Jesus. How do you explain that? Well, Peter and the disciples embraced Jesus as the Son of God and as the promised Messiah, the Christ, the one who would save God's people, but they didn't understand what that all meant, nor did they understand what it really means to follow Jesus. So Jesus explains.

You want to follow me?

1. **I have to die.**
2. **So do you.**
3. **But it'll be worth it.**

1. **I have to die.**

Jesus says to them, "You know what I've come to do. You know that I'm going to make all things new and redeem my people from death. But if that's going to happen, I have to die. I have to suffer at the hands of the chief priests and the teachers of the Law- the most respected, powerful, elite people in our society, they are going to reject me, and I am going to be publicly executed while they laugh at me. But that won't be the end because I will rise from the grave.

Peter likely doesn't even listen to the last part, he takes Jesus aside and he politely asks his teacher and the one who he himself declared to be God, "What does that mean? That's confusing! Help me understand!" No. He says, "NEVER Lord! How dare you say that about yourself! That will never happen to you! I refuse to believe that! I refuse to let that happen!" What's his problem? Peter is operating under the assumption that since Jesus is here to save his people, he's going to do it the way other people do it. He's going to be popular! He's going to be influential! He's going to be accepted and loved by the powerful people of his culture, and he's going to save them from the earthly enemies like the oppressive Romans who were ruling over them. He's going to flex his muscles and gain followers and prestige and maybe raise an army and conquer and life on earth is going to get better for his followers, especially Peter and the disciples. But if what Jesus is saying is true, that means that he is going to be socially embarrassed and shamed by the most powerful of the cultural elites, that he is going to be beaten and mocked and killed, and so are all those who follow him, especially Peter and the disciples.

Jesus turns to him and says the same thing he says to Satan when he tried to tempt him in the desert: "Get out of my sight Satan. You are thinking about the "things of Man, not God." What is he saying there? He's saying, "Peter, don't you understand what I've come to do? You think your biggest problem is that you're not successful enough, not rich enough, not respected enough, not happy enough, and that my job is to fix that for you. You're focused on the symptoms, not the illness of the human race. Why do you feel pain? Why do you hurt? Why do you suffer? Why are you and every other human being so messed up? Because you have sinned against your creator and whether you realize it or not, you owe him a debt that can only be paid by your life. Don't you get it Peter? If I'm going to defeat your true enemies, death and Satan, I have to be defeated. I have to die so you don't have to." Don't you see? Jesus didn't come to crush his enemies, but to be crushed by his enemies, and through his being crushed, he destroyed Satan's power. That's what we call the foolishness of the Cross. Because through his death, he would earn eternal life for all who believe in him. Through his weakness, not strength, he won. Through something so ugly and wrong, something beautiful and right happened- we were forgiven. And through his resurrection from the dead, he proves that it all worked, that the sacrifice was accepted and that all that he has said is true.

In order for you and I to follow Jesus, he had to die and be risen back to life. Now, so do you.

2. **So do you.**

Jesus says, "Whoever wants to follow me must deny himself and pick up his cross and follow me. Consider the way that Jesus saved you and me and defeated Satan forever: Not through power, but through weakness. Not through charging at his enemies and slaying them, but by letting his enemies slay him. Not through making himself big, but by making himself small. Not by claiming the crown of glory, but by enduring the cross of pain and shame. Not by taking lives, but by giving his: and now he says, "If you want to be my follower, you do the same."

Consider this: Jesus, the Son of God, wasn't embraced by his government or by the cultural elites of his day; should we expect to be? Jesus didn't receive material wealth from his Father in Heaven as proof that he was loved and approved of; should we? Jesus's life and ministry was filled with death, sorrow, and tears- he did not have a particularly happy life; should we expect to? Jesus' own family rejected him, and his own friends betrayed and abandoned him; should we expect any different?

As American citizens, it's been ingrained in all of our heads that our purpose in life is the pursuit of happiness, and that if we want it badly enough, we can fulfill our dreams and do anything we put our minds to. We're taught that if you pray hard enough, believe hard enough, live good enough, God will give it to you. He'll give you health, wealth, and happiness, you just have to love him enough and pray and do the right things. God'll get you there, just keep believing. Tell that to the first century Christians in Ancient Rome being devoured alive by lions as people cheer because they refused to renounce their faith in Jesus. Tell that to the Christians during Luther's Reformation who were burnt alive at the stake because they were faithful to Jesus and his Gospel. Say "God helps those who help themselves" to our Christian brothers and sisters in Nigeria being hunted like animals by Islamic radicals. Say "when the praises go up, the blessings come down" to the woman who has been begging Jesus for a baby for years with no success. Say that to the husband and father who has to explain to his children that Mom's in Heaven with Jesus now. Say that to the lifelong Christian whose body is being ravaged by cancer, and all the Christians who are struggling with temptation, hunger, sickness, depression, anxiety, loneliness, persecution, and pain. Really? God gives happiness, health, and wealth to those who do what he says and believe in him? That's not what Jesus says. Contrary to what many Christians believe and teach, pain in your life is not a punishment or a sign that God's unhappy with you. Pain is to be expected. Jesus suffered his Cross, and through his suffering, secured his great reward: us. And now Jesus says to his people: "Expect to suffer. If you are truly my disciple, then you will have pain in this life. You will have to bear a cross because I bore a cross. And because of my cross, your cross is not a punishment, but it's proof that you are mine."

Do you see what this means? I don't know who here needs to hear it, but I know someone does because at least one person in this room is suffering under a horrible cross. He's not angry with you. He's not punishing you. In fact, he's suffering with you. I don't know why he's chosen to make you suffer this. But I know this: He loves you more than you would ever dare hope, and the fact that you are suffering this cross is your personal proof that you are his. Here's what I mean. If you live in this world and find that you are constantly in pain, constantly oppressed, constantly sad, constantly hurt, then maybe that means that this world isn't where you belong. Maybe you were meant for a different world. A world where we don't ever have to say goodbye. A world where sin and death and pain are forgotten. Now, we bear our crosses, we suffer whatever it is God asks us to suffer whether it be big or small, and even as we cry tears of pain we suffer with joy. Why?

3. It'll be worth it.

Because it will be worth it. Look at what Jesus says: Whoever loses his life for me will gain it. Whatever you lose in this life, doesn't Jesus have the ability to pay it back and so much more? "What good is it to gain the whole world, all the health, wealth, and happiness this world could offer if you lose your eternal life with him? It's just not worth it. Isn't it better to suffer for a little while and enjoy the bliss and joy and pleasure of life with the one who has made you and kept you? Whatever your cross here on earth, it's nothing in comparison to the joy and beauty and glory that Jesus has earned for you.

Jesus is saying that whatever cross he calls you to bear, whether it be cancer or criticism, sickness or sorrow, temptation or tears, loneliness or poverty, strife or anger, depression or anxiety, loss of friendships, persecution, firstly, he suffers it too with you. And whatever cross he calls you to bear, it's not worth comparing to the glory and the bliss of his presence in heaven.

And, most importantly, your cross, your suffering is meaningful. You just sang it! When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie, my grace all sufficient shall be your supply. The flames will not hurt you; I only design your dross to consume and your gold to refine. He's refining you. He's perfecting you. I don't know why God has placed your cross on you, but even if the only reason was that God is using this to make you more like him, and to prepare you for the joy he has in store for you in the next life, and to remind you that this broken, screwed up world isn't your home, wouldn't it be worth it? Even if that were the only reason, wouldn't it be worth it?

I'll close with this. It may not get better. You may never understand why God has sent you this pain until after you see him face to face. God has called us to bear our crosses- that is the Christian life God has called you to- but my goodness- don't suffer alone. We need each other. Christians have to be close to each other. They have to support each other, they have to love each other, they have to take care of each other. Yes, we must bear our crosses, and we have to do it together. This congregation simply has to do this. And I would be willing to bet that there is someone in this room who is bearing a cross that is so heavy, so hard, and God has put you here today to help them.

Therefore let's bear our crosses together until that day comes when we see Jesus face to face, and it all makes sense, and the pain is gone, and the tears are wiped from our faces, and he lifts the cross off of your shoulder, and replaces it with a crown of glory on your head and says, "You're home now." Amen.