

Theme: The Cross is Crucial 1) For Christ and 2) For the Christian

Have you ever been watching your favorite kind of action movie, you know the kind with Bruce Willis or Liam Neeson or Gerard Butler, and right when the “going starts to get rough”, you do a little bit of mental cheating? The action is getting fierce. The scene has your fists clenching your armrest. You’re getting anxious about how the hero is possible going to make it out of this scene alive because everything looks pretty dire, but then for just a second you press pause in your mind and you think to yourself, “We’re only twenty minutes into the movie, Bruce Willis can’t die here.” Then you return to the scene a little more at ease, knowing somehow, he’s going to make it out alive.

That’s similar to the kind of cheating shortcut Peter was trying to take in our text today, except Peter wasn’t willing to think about Jesus dying at all. Not long before, Peter had made this beautiful proclamation of his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. But he wasn’t ready for what Jesus was about to say next. **“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day raised to life.”** Matthew 16:21 NIV 11.

Jesus was trying to explain to his disciples how crucial his death was going to be to the whole process. The Son of Man **must go** and suffer and be rejected and killed. And Peter, hearing this in so plain of words for the first time, is for one thing shocked, and then has the gumption to try and take Jesus aside and shut down this foolish talk. **“Never, Lord!” (16:22).** “You can’t die! You’re the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. That’s what I just got done saying, and anyway, we’re just getting this whole kingdom of God thing going.” **“This shall never happen to you.”** (16:22).

It’s here that Peter is revealing the prominent, but flawed way of thinking that many Jews had about the coming of the Messiah and what he was going to accomplish. They liked to think of the Messiah in earthly terms with earthly motives, as a fierce warrior with his garments dipped in blood who was going to destroy the Romans and bring back a kingdom of power to Israel, like the picture painted in Isaiah 63. **“It was for me the day of vengeance; the year for me to redeem had come...I trampled the nations in my anger; in my wrath I made them drunk and poured their blood on the ground.”** (Isaiah 63:4,6) It’s not that this isn’t a true biblical description of the Messiah, it’s just that it’s one about the Last Day, and that day hasn’t come

yet. But Peter and the disciples were ready for the action to start now. Peter would show how ready he was to draw a sword and chop off an ear, but what he wasn't ready to talk about was his Messiah dying.

So Jesus was going to have to explain just how crucial his death was going to be, how crucial the cross was for him and for us as well. It's kind of interesting that the word crucial, which now means necessary or vitally important, actually comes from the Latin word "CruX" which means "cross." That's our theme today. **The Cross is Crucial** 1) For the Christ, as well as 2) for the Christian.

Peter had tried to take Jesus aside and rebuke him for saying this, which is really something when you think about it—a sinner telling the Messiah how to run his kingdom. But Jesus quickly turns aside and gives him about the most severe rebuke we could imagine coming from our Savior. **"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God but merely human concerns."** (16:23)

Jesus knew what was crucial and necessary for his mission to be completed, and for the concerns of God to be accomplished. He knew the other pictures that had been painted of him in the Old Testament, not just of a fierce avenging warrior, but also of a lamb led to the slaughter. He knew what it said about himself 10 chapters before Isaiah 63, in Isaiah 53. **"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;... He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. He was assigned a grave with the wicked."** He knew the cross was crucial for him, the Christ, the Lord's Anointed, to suffer, in order to pay for sin, to atone for punishment, and to bring salvation.

And so, when Peter forbid Jesus from doing the most crucial thing needed for our salvation, it was totally appropriate for Jesus to call him Satan, because that's what Satan does. He is God's adversary, the one who resists, rebels, and opposes him. And Peter was acting as Satan's pawn, resisting and opposing the most fundamental part of the work of Christ, while putting his own human concerns to the forefront.

We deserve the same stern rebuke when we point our finger up at God and wonder why he hasn't simply come and stomped on the heads of all our enemies already and brought his kingdom to bear for us to enjoy in some kind of thousand year reign here on this earth. We deserve the same rebuke when we try to take God aside and give him some advice about how to

better run his kingdom. “Just put me in charge, Lord, and I’ll clean up the streets around here. Everything will be running in tip-top shape by the morning.”

What we actually find is that our concerns are short-sighted and selfish and would bring everything to ruin in a matter of moments. So it’s a necessary thing for us to take this rebuke to heart and relinquish our claim to controlling his kingdom. And it’s a good thing Jesus is the Savior and not us, and he is concerned about the long game, about his Father’s concerns. He’s the one who was willing to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and be killed because he’s the lamb that God had chosen and slain before the foundation of the world. So it was *crucial for the Christ to go to the cross* and it’s crucial for us to let God the King rule his kingdom and the Savior do his work of saving, which goes through the cross. This is the “foolish” way God chose for us to be saved. **“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.” 1 Corinthians 1:18**

When Jesus has brought us to the realization *that the cross is crucial for the Christ*, then it becomes more feasible for us to realize that the cross *is crucial for the Christian too*. Sometimes I think we picture ourselves as if we’re Simon of Cyrene, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Remember him? He was the random bystander that happened to get picked out of the crowd by the Romans and forced to carry Jesus’ cross the rest of the way. Can you imagine being him that day, thinking, “How did I get singled out for this? What did I do to deserve this? Why’d they put it on me? I’m not with him?” Ever asked those questions of God? I have! Like “How did I get singled out to be the father of a child who has a one in a million list of special needs? Why did my mom have to die on September 4th when I was 25? Why did my childhood home burn in a housefire?”

When we ask those kinds of questions, we imply to God that if we are with him, nothing bad should ever happen to us, and no cross should ever come. Jesus says the opposite. He says the cross is crucial for every Christian. **“Whoever wants to be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”** (16:24) This one verse is a frontal assault on the predominant spirit of our age that says, “Be who you want to be, your authentic self, and don’t let anybody else tell you what that is. Do what you want to do, love whoever you want to love.” Even more, it’s an assault on my sinful flesh that say, “My life, my rules!” Instead, Jesus says, “No!.” **“Deny yourselves.”**

Deny your concerns, your desires, your urges, for the sake of taking up the concerns of God, and endure the pain and displeasure that might come with it. That's what Jesus refers to as "the cross."—the pains we endure *as a result of following him faithfully*. It's not necessarily just every ache or pain we have in this life, but it's the process of bearing that pain in a God-pleasing way. The cross isn't just an illness that you have, but struggling against the worry or doubt that it brings while relying on God. The cross isn't just the fact that God wants you to worship him, but the cross comes when your kid gets benched because you decided that worship was more important than your kid's game. The cross isn't just that God asks you to give offerings, but the cross comes when you realize that in order to give your firstfruit offerings, you may not be able to drive a 2023 SUV or buy an elite fishing boat or afford a mortgage on your dream house. The cross isn't just losing a loved one, but it comes as you deal with your grief in a way that doesn't leave you bitter and angry at God.

Denying yourself and bearing the cross also means you don't get to run off and ignore or escape from the reality that comes along with following Christ. You don't get to jump into a bottle until the pain is gone. You don't get to click and scroll your way into some fantasy land that revolves around you. The cross says "No! Deny giving that to yourself because it's not good for you." Doing so may be a heavy load, but Jesus has not given you anything to bear that for 1) he has not born himself and 2) that is not in some way bitter tasting medicine meant for your healing. *The cross is crucial for every Christian, because carrying it forces us to let go of what we want for ourselves and hold onto what he wants for us, which is infinitely better!*

If you really want to put that down, put down the cross and hold on to the rest of that stuff in this life; if that's really what you want to save; if you really want to say "No" to Jesus so that you can say "Yes" to yourself, then at least do it knowing you're not just making a bad decision in the here and now, you're making an eternity-costing decision. **"Whoever wants to save their life will lose it... what good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"** (Matthew 16:26). There won't be a single thing you've bought or saved in this life, not your mortgage nor your SUV that you'll be able to exchange for your soul when your case is next up on the docket on Judgement Day.

You can't, but there is someone who can, who, in fact, already did, and he did it not with any earthly thing, but with his own life. He's the one who went to Jerusalem and suffered many

things and was handed over by his own people and nailed to a cross just as God had planned from the foundation of the world. He's the Lamb who took our pain and punishment upon himself and suffered it for us, even to the point of death on that cross. And the whole point of it was so that he might cross through death and bring life out on the other side. Peter was so focused on not letting Jesus die that he wasn't even listening when Jesus finished the sentence, **"He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."** (16:21). First death, then life First the cross then the crown,!

That's what God from eternity has been intent on bringing through the cross. Life! Jesus said, **"I have come that they may have life and have it to the full."** (John 10:10). And because he's the one with real lasting life, he invites us to follow him on the way he has paved through death and the cross and find our life in him. **"Whoever loses their life for me will find it."** He's not looking for us to deny ourselves so that our lives are miserable and we have no fun. He wants us to die to a life in this world that is really no life at all so that he can give us life to the full. **"If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his."** **Romans 6:5** *That's why the cross is crucial for the Christ and for the Christian.* Amen.

I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. Amen.