

This Will Hurt You

Matthew 16:21-26 (NIV)

²¹ 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 be raised to life. ²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" ²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "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." ²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ 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? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Just before these verses today, Peter confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He is the Anointed One, the Chosen One, the One who will crush the devil and save the world. He is God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe. He is more powerful than all. Jesus praises Peter's confession, says he will build his Church on it, and that the gates of hell will not overcome it.

Then Matthew, the author of this Gospel account, transitions. "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 be raised to life." (verse 21) Wait. You are going to suffer and be killed? You? You, the Christ, the Son of the Living God, the all-powerful, the one whose Church hell itself will not overcome? Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" (verse 22)

Putting ourselves in Peter's place, would we have said anything different? Imagine your best friend, constant companion, and mentor told you one day without any warning that they were facing inevitable suffering and death. Would you be able to conjure up words for a response? Would you smile wryly and say, "You're joking, right?" Then when their demeanor doesn't change, the seriousness of the situation sets in. You show your denial. "No, that's not going to happen to you. You can't die."

Jesus' scolding voice is unleashed, a voice devoid of gentleness or compassion: "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." (verse 23) Ow. You just praised me for my confession that you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Now you call me Satan for expressing my desire not to see you die? I don't want to see you get hurt. I don't want you to die. I don't want to lose you! I love you. I will suffer watching you suffer.

We, the human race, try to avoid pain and suffering. We try to extend life and cheat death. We see doctors, go to therapy, take pills all in the name of getting rid of pain, as if that's the goal of life. The term "quality of life" gets thrown as if it's not worth living if we suffer while doing so. In fact, we are taken aback when the doctors and the pills and the therapy don't immediately work and we still have pain. If God is merciful, then he would take my pain away right now, right? He wouldn't allow me to keep hurting. These are human concerns – to be free of pain and suffering, to avoid death. This is where Peter was coming from, where we come from, but these are not the concerns of God, not the things that matter most.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (verse 24) If you want to be my disciple, there will be pain. This will hurt. That's the cross, a means of execution, a means of death, a slow torture device, meant to make you survive for days before dying, and dying not of blood loss, but of suffocation, that you couldn't muster the strength any longer to pull yourself up to gasp a lung-full of air. Jesus has now begun to teach his disciples that he will die like a criminal in this excruciating way while the disciples can't imagine Jesus doing anything worth the capital punishment of the cross. Jesus is going to suffer and die on a cross because he has in mind the concerns of God.

God was concerned about fulfilling the role of the Messiah. Even though many Jews did not think that their Messiah, their Christ, would suffer and die, God had very clearly prophesied that this was the case. Nearly 700 years before Jesus went to the cross, Isaiah said about the Servant of God, his Anointed One, the Messiah, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray,

each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:5-6) Jesus going to Jerusalem; suffering many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law; being killed; then being raised to life on the third day were the concerns of God. This is what he had to do as the Messiah. He would deny himself and take up his cross in order to take our sins upon himself, in order to heal us from our pain and suffering, in order to give us life when we lived under the sentence of death.

Day to day, we get wrapped up into thinking about how I can reduce my pain and my suffering as a means of self-preservation. But this pursuit of self-preservation quickly becomes the end all and be all of existence, that my purpose in life is to make my existence pain free. It’s a pursuit that looks at only this earthly side of life . This is having in mind merely human concerns.

The end of pain and suffering and even death this side of heaven, is not the end all and be all of our life. We cannot avoid pain and suffering, no matter how hard we try. We cannot cheat death; it will come for us as a consequence of our sins. Diseases and old age will ravage our bodies because we are sinners and we live in a sin-filled world.

Instead of trying to give us a pain free life on earth, Jesus denied himself and took up his cross in order to give his life in exchange for ours. We could not pay this cost, but Jesus could. These are the concerns of God. This is why he rebukes Peter so vehemently. He’s telling Peter, what you are about to see me do, this is going to hurt you. You are going to have to see me go through this pain and suffering. And you are going to know that I don’t deserve it. You are going to know that I could stop it at any time. And yet I will do this because I am denying myself that pain-free and deathless existence that is rightfully mine so that I can give my life in exchange for yours. That’s the cost I will pay to fulfill the will of God.

It hurts to see the innocent suffer. It hurts more when you know that they are suffering because of what you did, when someone takes the punishment for what you did wrong because you didn’t own up to it. The guilt eats at you. You want to cry out, “Stop! It’s my fault! That’s my punishment! That’s what I deserve! Punish me, not him!” But Jesus looks you in the eyes and says, “No. I have denied myself to suffer and be killed for you. I give my life for you.” This is the message of the cross, what it means to take up your cross.

It hurts you to watch this, but at the same time it brings you joy to recognize that he is actually standing in your place, hurting for you because this is for your benefit, your joy, your eternal life. He gave his life for you. He gave himself in exchange for your soul to be spared from the pits of hell. He denied himself so that he would not deny you from heaven. Jesus hurt for you so that one day you would never hurt again. The message of the cross hurts you, but it also brings you the greatest joy possible.

While still in that joy of knowing what Jesus taking up his cross means for us, he calls us to the same self-denial: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (verse 24) He’s not asking you to figure out a way that you can experience capital punishment on a cross like he did. But he is telling you to deny yourself, to deny a life of pursuing nothing but earthly happiness, a life of trying to avoid pain and suffering. As Jesus’ disciple, I am not here to seek my pleasure. I am here to follow Jesus, even when that means going through pain and suffering. Instead of seeking my own pleasure, instead of indulging in what I want when I want thinking that this will make my life happier even though this is not what God wants for me, I deny myself. I resist temptation. That’s not easy; it’s painful. I have to beat down my sinful desires that wants to do the things that I know are wrong, the things that are not God-pleasing. It hurts me to follow Jesus because I have to deny myself.

Yet this pain will end because Jesus took up his cross. He denied himself and so overcame this world. He knew that on the third day after taking up his cross and being killed, he would be raised to life. Going through the pain and suffering of the cross was worth it because it brought life to the world, to me and to you. He brought life eternal to us because he is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I take up my cross and follow him even though it hurts me to deny my own pleasures, to deny my sinful nature, in order to live the life he has given me. Because my God hurt for me, I am saved. Because my God hurt for me, I will follow him, even when it hurts. Amen.