

“BEGINNING THE STEEP ASCENT”
MATTHEW 16:21-23

The path that Jesus traversed from the time of His temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4) to Peter’s confession in Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16) had been relatively smooth. Besides the harsh criticism of the scribes and Pharisees and the cool reception in His hometown of Nazareth, Jesus had been received pretty well by those who encountered Him and saw Him in action. His popularity among Galileans had grown steadily, and many had concluded that He was, at the very least, a genuine prophet sent by God.

However, Jesus lived during a time when the Jews were anticipating not just a prophet, but a Deliverer who would restore their favored status in the world and install God’s visible kingdom on earth. They called this person Messiah (or Christ), and the reason they were looking for Him is because their Scriptures contained dozens of prophecies that predicted His coming and the kingdom He would establish.

From chapters 4-16 Matthew has carefully authenticated Jesus’ identity as that anticipated Messiah. Jesus proved He was the Christ by His authoritative teaching and His astounding miracles, which included healing the sick, making the lame to walk and the blind to see, exorcising demons, walking on water, multiplying a few loaves and fish to feed thousands, and raising a dead girl to life.

But even though Jesus did these things, most of which were fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies, many people remained ambivalent about His identity. The religious leaders, for various reasons, accused Him of being from the devil. Some thought He was the second coming of Elijah, or a reincarnated John the Baptist, or one of the other prophets.

But when Jesus asked the disciples who they thought He was, Peter answered, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Matt. 16:16).

17 And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:17-19).

Pastor Brad did a great job of explaining these verses last week (and I would encourage you to read or listen to that message if you have not already). Suffice it to say, Jesus’ statements were a source of great encouragement for Peter. Jesus had declared him to be blessed, and then promised that he would have a prominent role in His kingdom.

It is not difficult to imagine what was going on in Peter’s mind after this conversation. I’m guessing he was downright giddy. “Wow! This is so cool! This is turning out even better than I thought! I mean, I knew that being one of the Twelve was an honor, but it sounds like I’m going to have a key role in the days ahead. I wonder what that is going to look like? Will I be Jesus’ chief of staff or His top advisor? Will my office be right next to the oval office in the Statehouse? And when will this all come about? Is Jesus going to make His move soon and start appointing cabinet members and assembling His army? And how is Jesus going to overcome His political adversaries who are currently in positions of power—namely the Pharisees and Sadducees? Will Jesus be able to change their minds about Him and secure their support and allegiance?”

I’m pretty sure that Peter’s imagination was very active after Jesus singled him out and said he would have an important role in the kingdom. I’m pretty sure he was expecting Jesus

to shed more light on the specific developments of his impending administration. So, it is no surprise that what came next was a shock to Peter's theological sensibilities.

Look at **verse 21**. *²¹ From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*

Think about this statement from Peter and the disciples' perspective. Jesus had just confirmed that He was, indeed, the Messiah. Messiah was "the Deliverer" who would liberate the Jews from their oppressors. Messiah was "the Son of David," a warrior Prince who would reign on David's throne in Jerusalem in unrivaled splendor and majesty. And yet after confirming that He was this Messiah, Jesus begins to show His disciples that instead of going to Jerusalem to be crowned king, He would go there and suffer at the hands of the religious authorities, and be killed.

That did not make a bit of sense! It did not fit into their theological notions about Messiah and the kingdom. It did not resonate with their expectations of their own roles as Messiah's confidants and cabinet members. I mean, seriously, what good can a dead Messiah do? How can He possibly lead a revolution and overthrow an empire like Rome? He may be a source of inspiration, but you certainly cannot count on a dead man to be your king.

Remember, we have entitled our series in Matthew, "The Upside-Down Kingdom." And certainly, what Jesus just said to His disciples was upside down, from their perspective. Jesus was telling them, yet again, that their expectations and pre-conceived notions about what Messiah would do and how His kingdom would be inaugurated did not correspond with God's will. They were under the impression that in the days ahead Jesus would continue to get more popular and more powerful until He had convinced the whole Jewish population that He was Messiah. Jesus just told them that His popularity would take a nosedive, that His public approval rating would tank, and that people would become so angry and offended by Him that He would be assaulted and killed.

But Jesus wants them to know that this is God's plan. Notice that Matthew says, "*From that time Jesus began to show His disciples...*" There were a couple of other times previously that Jesus had hinted at His future suffering and death, but this is a dramatic and intentional shift in Jesus's focus. From this point on, Jesus is giving His disciples new insight about God's plans and purposes regarding His life and ministry.

Theologians have a term for this. It is called "Progressive Revelation." And this is a pattern for the way God reveals Himself and His will to His people. He typically does it incrementally. When reading the Old Testament, one discovers that He revealed only so much of His plans and purposes to individuals. For example, He revealed very little to Abraham, then He revealed some more to Moses, and more to David, and more to Isaiah, and more to Ezekiel.

Such was the case here with Jesus and His disciples. Jesus had authenticated Himself to them as the Messiah by His words and deeds, and (as we learned last week) the Father had convinced them that He was, indeed, the Messiah. That is very important revelation. But it is not everything. Now, Jesus *began* to show them that "...*He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*"

This is new information, but it is not much information. It is just a bare bones summary of what lies ahead. Jesus did not tell them yet about the cross or explain the significance of His shed blood. He did not tell them at this point that there were far more powerful enemies

than Rome from which they needed to be delivered—namely, sin, Satan, and death—and that God had sent Messiah to defeat those enemies through His death and resurrection. In fact, these things were not revealed to the disciples until after Jesus died and rose again.

But even with the minimal amount of information that Jesus gave to His disciples, it was still shocking, and it produced a dramatic reaction in Peter. Look at **verse 22**. ²² *And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”*

In typical fashion, it is Peter who opens his mouth first. Perhaps emboldened by what Jesus had just said to him regarding his future role in the kingdom, he actually takes the Lord aside and rebukes him. And the grammar of the Greek text is emphatic. “Never, Lord! No way shall this happen!”

It is hard to know exactly what motivated Peter to be so emphatic. Some have suggested that he was overconfident after his commendation and thought he knew better than Jesus what should happen to Him. I rather think it was just an impulsive reaction to information that he was not yet prepared to accept—information that rocked his world. Peter could not yet conceive of a suffering Messiah, let alone a dead Messiah. For Peter it was unthinkable that the Messiah would or could be rejected by the Jewish nation and humiliated in the way Jesus had described, and I can imagine that his reaction came more from confusion and fear and perhaps even panic than from pride.

Whatever the reasons, Jesus has an interesting response in **verse 23**. ²³ *But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matthew 16:21-23).*

It is impossible *not* to see the irony in Jesus’ statement to Peter. He had just finished calling him “blessed,” and he had just promised to give him a prominent role in his kingdom. Now he is calling him “Satan”. What does Jesus mean by this? Was He suggesting that Peter was demon-possessed, or that Satan was literally speaking through him?

I don’t think so. I believe Jesus is indicating that the perspective Peter represents is the same as Satan’s (Blomberg, NAC). Trying to thwart God’s plan for Jesus’ life is in fact the role of the devil, not of a disciple. It is interesting that the Greek word translated, “Get behind me” or “go away from me” is that same word Jesus used to rebuke Satan when He was tempted in the wilderness (Matt. 4:10).

The point is Jesus emphatically rejects Peter’s suggestion and rebukes him for it. That steep ascent which would take Jesus to Jerusalem where He would suffer, and then to a hill called Golgotha where He would be crucified was God’s method of providing salvation for the whole world. And Peter needed to accept this, whether he understood it fully or not.

Jesus had assigned him to be the foundation block of the church. But in this situation, he was acting more like a “stumbling block,” which is the literal meaning of the word translated “hindrance.” Matthew uses the word frequently as a metaphor for an enticement to sin. (Blomberg, NAC). Peter’s suggestion that Jesus must bypass the suffering and death and go straight to His throne might *seem* like the suggestion of a caring friend. But it does not take into consideration God’s primary purpose for sending Jesus into this world. That is what Jesus meant when He said, *“For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”*

Peter had a human perspective at this point. Humans are naturally drawn to comfort and safety and security. Humans naturally take the path of least resistance. Humans naturally avoid steep, perilous paths that result in pain, suffering, and death.

But such is the path that God had determined Jesus take. Because God planned to do something *through* Jesus' suffering and death that was absolutely necessary for Peter's good, for the good of all the disciples, for the good of the Jews, *and* for the good of the whole world.

And this plan was nothing new. God had predicted that He would do this through the prophet Isaiah. Listen to these words from chapter 53.

53 *Who has believed what He has heard from us?*

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

² *For He grew up before Him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;*

*He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him,
and no beauty that we should desire Him.*

³ *He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.*

⁴ *Surely He has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed Him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.*

⁵ *But He was pierced for our transgressions;
He was crushed for our iniquities;
upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with His wounds we are healed.*

⁶ *All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on Him
the iniquity of us all.*

⁷ *He was oppressed, and He was afflicted,
yet He opened not His mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so He opened not His mouth.*

⁸ *By oppression and judgment He was taken away;
and as for His generation, who considered
that He was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?*

⁹ *And they made His grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in His death,
although He had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in His mouth.*

¹⁰ *Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush Him;
He has put Him to grief;*

- when His soul makes an offering for guilt,
 He shall see His offspring; He shall prolong His days;
 the will of the LORD shall prosper in His hand.
- ¹¹ Out of the anguish of His soul He shall see and be satisfied;
 by His knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
 make many to be accounted righteous,
 and He shall bear their iniquities.
- ¹² Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the many,
 and He shall divide the spoil with the strong,
 because He poured out His soul to death
 and was numbered with the transgressors;
 yet He bore the sin of many,
 and makes intercession for the transgressors.

This was God's will, God's plan, in order to fulfill God's purposes. It did not make a bit of sense to Peter at the time Jesus began to talk about it; it still does not make sense to people who merely think from a human perspective. The Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians, "*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing*" (1 Cor. 1:18). It is nonsensical. It is offensive. It is a symbol of revulsion and shame. Oxford philosopher, Sir Alfred Ayer, stated that of all religions, Christianity is the most barbaric. Why? Because it rests upon the cross making it "intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous."

And while that may seem like a gross overstatement, it is simply the rational, logical, honest conclusion of someone who doesn't comprehend the horrific nature of sin and its dreadful consequences, and someone who doesn't understand what is required to satisfy the justice of a holy, righteous God so that a sinner can be pardoned of that sin and reconciled to Him.

Later in the New Testament we are told that Jesus' death on the cross was a sin offering—a blood sacrifice that was necessary in order to appease the wrath of God against the sin of humanity. He died in the place of sinners so that there could be forgiveness and reconciliation between God and sinners. And if He did not do this, every human being would go to hell, which is where every sinner deserves to go when they die.

This teaching becomes "intellectually contemptible" when someone does not believe in God or in life after death. It becomes "morally outrageous" when this supposed "God" is believed to be perfect and must be placated. And it becomes "barbaric" when the method of that appeasement is a *blood* sacrifice. I mean, *blood*? Why, that's silly! That's foolishness!

So why do we Christians in the 21st century still cling to the Old Rugged Cross? Why do we insist on its centrality? Simply because, as Paul said, while "*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, for us who are being saved it is the power of God*" (1 Cor. 1:18).

The cross, brutal and bloody and horrible as it was, was God's method of rescuing us from our lost and sinful condition. It was the means by which our sins could be paid for and God's justice could be satisfied and peace with God could be secured. A peace that blossoms in this life when we are reconciled to God through faith in Jesus, but that comes to full fruition when we leave this life and get to live in His presence forever.

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Main Idea: *Jesus divulges His perilous journey to the cross, which the disciples are not prepared to accept*

Jesus divulges to His disciples the dangerous road ahead (21)
He *must* go to Jerusalem

He will suffer at the hands of the religious leaders

He will be killed

He will rise from the dead

Peter rebukes Jesus (22)
He may have reacted out of pride

He may have reacted out of fear
This defied Peter's expectations

This did not make sense

Jesus rebukes Peter (23)
He identifies what Peter said as satanic

He calls Peter out for his earthly perspective

Prophetic Proof—Isaiah 53