

JOURNEY TO DEATH

SERIES: SUFFERING SERVANT, CONQUERING KING



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Various Scripture in Mark

Do you remember those big yellow school buses? I have a vivid memory of riding one early on a Saturday morning. Most likely, I was a sophomore in high school. We were somewhere between Houston and San Antonio. I was not having a good time. The only way to describe what I was feeling was dread.

I was on the wrestling team, and we were headed to a tournament. To earn a spot on the varsity team, I had lost weight and hadn't eaten that morning so that I could pass the weigh-in. I wouldn't say I liked wrestling. At this point, I wasn't very good at it. In all likelihood, I'd lose my first match very quickly and be done.

Why was I doing this? Why was I going somewhere that I really didn't want to go? An early Saturday morning school bus driving toward a humbling defeat.

Have you ever felt this way? Like you were going somewhere you didn't want to get to? A sense of dread at what lay before you? What do we do when we're on a journey with an unpleasant destination?

This morning we begin a new preaching series for the season of Lent. Like we've done in the past, this series has been prepared in collaboration with several other churches in Palo Alto. Pastors from University AME Zion, Lord's Grace Christian Church, Palo Alto Vineyard Church, Union Presbyterian Church, and First Christian Church have met to study these passages so we can learn from each other's insights and preach them within our churches.

We'll be going on a journey through the gospel of Mark, looking at several stories featuring Jesus. Two themes will guide us along the way: opposite but complementary. We'll look at how Mark presents Jesus as a suffering servant and a conquering king simultaneously. When God came to earth as a man, he suffered more deeply than we can understand but eventually declared a more complete victory than we could ever imagine.

Today we watch as Jesus begins his journey toward Jerusalem and the end of his ministry. Along the way, he makes three predictions about how he will suffer and be killed but rise again three days later. These predictions highlight that for Jesus, the journey to Jerusalem was a journey to death.

At PBC, we say we are "Following Jesus in the Silicon Valley." This morning we will see that when you follow in the footsteps of Jesus, they lead you to the cross.

At first, this seems like a sobering message. It seems like hard news. But we are going to discover that this is actually the best news we could possibly receive. No matter what else happens in our lives, we will face suffering. Whether or not you follow Jesus, life is really hard. There is simply no avoiding it. As much as we want to think otherwise, life does not simply go up and to the right.

When we follow Jesus to the cross and face hardship *with* him, everything is completely different. That is what we'll discover this morning. As Jesus predicts his death and resurrection, we will find out what following him looks like.

Jesus predicts his death three times as he walks from the northern part of Israel down to the capital city of Jerusalem.

The closer Jesus gets to Jerusalem, the more heightened these predictions become. As the story progresses, we can sense the tension rising. We get it. We all know that something terrible is going to happen when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. Jesus gets it as well.

But the disciples most definitely do not get it. This whole part of the story makes it sound like these disciples have no idea what's going on. While Jesus is predicting his death, they are arguing about who is the greatest, asking Jesus for a special seat at his table, trying to keep the children away from Jesus, and just generally not on the right page.

That is the big question we are left with: Why don't the disciples get it? Why don't they get it when Jesus predicts his death and resurrection in such clear terms? He clearly predicts his death and resurrection. But after he is killed, no one says, "just wait three days and he'll be back." No one expected the resurrection.

This is the question that will hang in the air for the gospel of Mark. I think there's a reason Mark leaves it out there. We'll come back to that at the end. For now, let's look at these three times Jesus predicts his death and resurrection and see what we can learn.

Rejected

How many of you feel like Jesus sometimes talks in riddles? In the gospel of Mark, the author tells us that Jesus intentionally speaks in a way that makes it hard to understand. But all of that changes in our first passage. In this case, Jesus is telling things exactly as they are.

Mark 8:31-32a:

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 And he said this plainly.

It doesn't get much more clear than this. This prediction establishes the pattern that Jesus will follow. In all three of these predictions, he will talk about suffering, death, and resurrection. The title "Son of Man" is used throughout. Each of the predictions ends with the exact same phrase, "after three days."

In this first prediction, the main theme is one of rejection. "The Son of Man... will be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes..." That's everyone—the whole religious institution. We know from other parts of the gospels that these three groups were sometimes in disagreement with each other. But at this moment, they are aligned. They have a common enemy. They will all reject Jesus.

Listen to how one commentator puts it.

This is a comprehensive rejection of Jesus by all the leading representatives of God's people Israel, and thus raises as acutely as possible the paradox of the unrecognised Messiah.¹

Put yourself in the place of the disciples. You've been following Jesus, and you've seen him have some conflict with the religious authorities. Now he says that no one with any authority will publicly accept him. Jesus will be rejected completely.

It makes sense that after Jesus says these words, Peter—we can always count on Peter to speak up—challenges him.

Mark 8:32b-33:

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

In the gospel of Mark, Peter often says what we're thinking. The narrator uses him as a way of drawing us in. We can understand Peter's reaction here. Of course, we would never say that to Jesus. But we might want to.

Notice how Jesus speaks to the crowd of people. Then Peter pulls him aside to rebuke him. But then Jesus turns again to include the whole crowd. When he does that, he turns to include us as well. Jesus' words may as well be spoken to us. "You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of men."

The great benefit of knowing that the way of Jesus leads toward rejection is that when we experience it, we don't have to be surprised. When we feel like no one supports us, or we're always misunderstood, or the people closest to us don't really know us, it helps to realize that this is what following Jesus is supposed to look like. That doesn't mean we go looking for rejection. But when it finds us, we can know that Jesus faced it as well.

The season of Lent is a time when we take the challenge of following Jesus seriously. The way of Christ leads toward rejection. How do we really feel about that? Are we willing to walk that road? Peter says no to Jesus. It doesn't make sense to walk straight into rejection. Do you recognize that temptation within your heart? How do we say no to God?

Throughout my life, I've realized more and more how hard I work to avoid rejection. Whether you call it people-pleasing, a fear of confrontation, or simply worrying about what others think about us, it's

something we all face. It can be liberating to think about Jesus intentionally walking head-on into guaranteed rejection. And it can be comforting to know that when I follow Jesus, he goes with me into those hard places.

Immediately after this passage, Jesus says the infamous words, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). This is what it looks like to follow Jesus. It is definitely not the path of least resistance. But as we will discover, it becomes the path of life, and we don’t have to walk it alone.

For now, the disciples keep following Jesus toward Jerusalem. In the following two predictions, we’ll see the details of the prediction intensify as the disciples’ response shrinks away.

Betrayed

The second prediction goes deeper. Jesus and the disciples are still up in the northern part of Israel but are winding closer toward Jerusalem.

Mark 9:30-32:

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, 31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” 32 But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

Jesus says that the Son of Man will be *delivered* into the hands of men. That word is translated as “betrayed” in other parts of the New Testament. It’s a Greek compound word from the words “to give” and “over.” Literally, “to hand over.”

It’s one thing to be rejected. I approach you, and you turn me away. It’s quite another thing to be betrayed. Betrayal is worse than rejection. Betrayal can only happen from a friend.

I watched the TV show *Last of Us* this week. It’s a zombie show, and I have a strict policy of not watching zombie shows, but this one is actually good. In the last episode, one of the characters said, “you can only be betrayed by people you trust.” That’s exactly right. That’s what makes betrayal so painful.

Notice what the disciples do in response to this: nothing. The text says they were afraid to ask him more. They understood enough of what he was saying to be afraid to want to know more. Because of the magnitude of what Jesus was saying, they intentionally stayed in the dark.

I have a confession: I don’t know where we keep the cat food in our house. We have two outdoor cats at our house. These cats don’t require a lot of effort, but there is some. And I need to confess to you that I do not know where we keep the cat food. I’m sure we store the cat food in a reasonable place. If I wanted to discover the location of the cat food, that would be a relatively easy task. In reality, it’s probably already lodged in my brain somewhere.

I don’t want to know where we keep the cat food because if I know where we keep the cat food, I might have to... feed the cats.

Here’s my question for you: What are we afraid to ask?

When Jesus speaks of his betrayal, the disciples stay silent. They don’t want to imagine what might lie before them. They are afraid to ask any more. I think some of us are afraid to go any deeper with God. Maybe we believe in Jesus, and we follow him. But we know there are areas that we’d prefer not to explore. We don’t want to ask whether how we spend money honors God. We don’t want to ask whether he is calling us into something different. We don’t want to ask because we don’t want to know.

When we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, they lead us to the cross.

I can resonate so easily with what the disciples are feeling here. There are so many complicated issues to think about. How do we think well about the issues in our culture, from politics to sexuality to family life? How does it make sense when church leaders abuse power and wrongdoing is covered up? How do we reconcile living in a pluralist culture and claiming to have exclusive truth? How does any of this make sense?

Are we afraid even to ask? Are we afraid that we won’t like the answers we find? I can promise you that following Jesus will not always make sense to you. But I can also promise that Jesus will be with you in the questions. You may not understand, but he will not betray you.

Humiliated

As the book of Mark progresses, Jesus gets closer and closer to Jerusalem. As readers, we sense that the tension is rising with each passing step.

The third and final prediction of Jesus' death occurs much closer to the city. He's almost there. The prediction itself is filled with much more detail. But as the detail increases, the response disappears. We don't hear anything about a direct response to these words.

Mark 10:32-34:

And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, 33 saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. 34 And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."

This time, the description of what will happen to him is entirely overwhelming. In the first prediction, we saw rejection. In the second one, we saw betrayal. We see both of those again, but now a long list of complete and total humiliation is added. They will mock Jesus, spit on him and flog him and kill him.

This prediction is devastating. You can be rejected and keep some dignity. You can be betrayed but still stand tall. But what is described here is complete humiliation.

As the predictions of his death continue, the suffering looms larger. Jesus leads this procession of people straight toward rejection, betrayal, humiliation, and death. This is the way of the Lord in the book of Mark. This is the path of Jesus.

As the predictions intensify, the response dissolves. After the first prediction, Peter rebukes Jesus. After the second, the disciples are confused and choose not to probe further. Now, we aren't told anything. I think they must have been in shock. In the next scene, James and John ask to be seated at Jesus' right and left hand in his glory. It's as if they didn't even hear what Jesus said.

In the narrative, the disciples' lack of response becomes an invitation to us. How will we respond? Will we keep following Jesus even if it means all of these things? Will we follow Jesus through death?

What we are seeing highlighted here is the drastic difference between the way of Jesus and the way of the world. Following Jesus on this road doesn't make sense. You get the sense that these disciples stick with Jesus only because they don't quite understand what he's really saying. If they understood, would they stay on the road with him?

A few weeks ago, journalist Malcolm Harris published a new book called *Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World*. His story begins in 1850 and winds through the Gold Rush, the founding of Stanford, the space race, the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s and the emergence of Silicon Valley. His is a particularly strident look at our history, and as a New York Times article points out, "Karl Marx's long shadow darkens every page."²

I'm interested in what doesn't appear in his story. In over 700 pages of narrative, the word "church" appears five times. We don't hear about the founding of First Christian Church in 1896 or the first baptisms by immersion on the Peninsula that occurred in San Francisquito Creek. We don't hear about Peninsula Bible Church being built on Middlefield Road in 1954. We don't hear about the Jesus movement in the 60s and 70s. Palo Alto's history is told without mentioning how God has been working in this area through his people for hundreds of years.

Partly that's because the way of Jesus is counterintuitive to the way of the world. This path that Jesus takes to Jerusalem will become a model for his followers. Early Christians were executed for their faith. In the middle ages, priests cared for Black Plague victims leading to a much higher mortality rate for priests.³ During the Reformation, people chose to translate the Bible into common languages even though it meant they would be executed for doing so.

The way of Jesus sometimes leads to death. It doesn't make sense. But God calls his people to face death so they can be part of his purposes in the world.

After three days

We've talked a lot about the suffering that Jesus predicted. Rejection. Betrayal. Humiliation. Death. In

all three predictions, Jesus has described his death and resurrection. We've focused on the suffering part because that seems to be what his disciples heard. Nobody seems to have remembered that Jesus said he would rise again.

This brings us back to our original question. How could they have missed it? Why did no one hear it?

Mark 8:31: "after three days rise again".

Mark 9:31: "after three days he will rise."

Mark 10:34: "after three days he will rise."

I don't have an answer to how the disciples could have missed it. I don't think we're supposed to have an answer. I think the question is supposed to bother us. We're supposed to wonder how these disciples could have missed it. But when we let ourselves wonder how they could miss it, we are invited to wonder about ourselves. If they could miss it so easily, could we do the same?

Here's the question we're invited to ask. Can you trust Jesus for life?

You need to know that God is on your side. You need to know that you are his prized creation. You need to know that all of this—the rejection, the betrayal, the humiliation—is motivated by love. God loves you so much, not because of anything you've done but because you are his treasure. You need to know that.

When God asks you to walk through difficult things, you can be confident that there is life on the other side. Don't get stuck on "he will be killed" and miss "after three days rise again." The way of Jesus leads to death. But more importantly, it leads through death. There is life on the other side.

One of my favorite songs right now is by Ellie Holcombe. It's called "Sweet Ever After." The chorus lyrics say, "Got a lot of bad days still coming our way // But it's sweet ever after // Wind and waves breaking over our walls // But the ship, it don't shatter // There'll be a lot of blessing by a life well-lived // As you lose what don't matter // But the sun's coming up on the stairway to Heaven // And it's sweet ever after."⁴ That's pretty good theology.

We're going to suffer. Only in Jesus does our death become life. Only in Jesus does our suffering become glory. We might as well suffer with Jesus and find life on the other side.

Conclusion

On that early Saturday morning years ago, I sat on a school bus with a sinking feeling of dread. Hungry, tired, and sure that I was headed toward certain and quick defeat. I don't remember exactly what happened that day. I wish I could say that I suffered through that tournament with Jesus, and I found life on the other side. I don't think that's how it played out, though.

Most of those tournaments ended just as I expected. Sometimes, I lost a match in under a minute, and the tournament was over. My dread turned out to be justified. It was a terrible day.

We will face really hard things in life. Not all of our little stories will end with "after three days he will rise again." Sometimes we'll fail. Our loved ones will die. We'll lose the tournament and have a long bus ride home.

That's why it's so important to know how Jesus fits into our experience. We will face some hard things in life because life is just hard. As followers of Jesus, we will face other hard things in life because he asks us to follow him into suffering. But all of them will be followed by being united to Christ in the resurrection.

You've probably seen the snow that has fallen in the foothills around here over the past few days. Thursday morning, I had the incredible experience of going for an early morning run and being surprised when I ran into a snowstorm. I arrived at the top of a viewpoint at Rancho San Antonio and saw the area covered in snow as more fell from the sky.

It was an incredible experience. I was up there alone for around 10 minutes. And, as I often do, I started praying for the Bay Area. I realized it'd been a long time since this area had seen a revival. And it's been a long time since we've seen snow. So I started praying that God would send his Spirit to fall on the Bay Area like snow. On top of a hill, with snow falling everywhere, I shouted for God to send his Spirit here to heal us and bring us back to spiritual health.

Maybe that's the path we're walking. Perhaps you'll be part of that path. Who knows what God will do as we follow Jesus together in Silicon Valley?

When we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, they lead us to the cross. But death disappears on the other side of the cross, and life lasts for eternity.

Endnotes

1. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing and Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2002) 335.
2. Gary Kamiya, "Can One City Be a Microcosm of Everything That's Wrong?" The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/14/books/malcolm-harris-palo-alto.html>.
3. John Kelly, *The Great Mortality* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2012) 224.
4. Ellie Holcombe, "Sweet Ever After." (YouTube. February, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcehViYSRZU>).