

## *Reclaiming Our Lives*

**Mar 8:31-38** Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.<sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.<sup>33</sup> But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.<sup>35</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.<sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?<sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?<sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

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In the Old Testament in the book of Ezekiel, the phrase "son of man" is used 93 times. In every instance, the phrase is meant literally. It means exactly that, son of man, a mortal, a human being. In the book of Daniel, chapter 7, the term Son of Man is also used.<sup>13</sup> As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.<sup>14</sup> To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. (Dan 7:13-14) This passage in Daniel uses the term "**like** a son of man" and then gives this figure great power and glory. By the time of Jesus, people were desperate for relief from the burden of the Roman occupation. When they read this passage from the book of Daniel they saw this as a prediction that the Messiah was coming to rescue them. And so, the term Son of Man came to be heard sometimes as simply meaning a mortal - and sometimes as a reference to the coming Messiah.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus often refers to himself as Son of Man. It's legitimate to ask whether he intended the phrase to mean a human being, or the Messiah. All through the first part of Mark's Gospel it seems apparent that the disciples heard the term "Son of Man" to mean a human being. Now, just before today's text, Jesus has asked the disciples, "Who do people say I am?" Then Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" For the first time in Mark, someone declares that Jesus is the Messiah. Peter blurts out in his impetuous way, "You are the Messiah!" We might say that Peter has proclaimed, "You are the Son of Man in capital letters, the one that Daniel was talking about, the one who will have dominion over all people." Jesus doesn't deny that he's the Messiah, but immediately begins to redefine what that means. Jesus says, "I am going to suffer." In shock, Peter reacts like no student of a rabbi should. He tries to correct and instruct his teacher. Peter has acknowledged Jesus as anointed by God, but turns to rebuke him for not getting it right. "No, Lord this can't be, you can't suffer. You have dominion over all nations and all people." Jesus takes Peter, and in front of the rest of the disciples, rebukes him. "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

Many of us don't want to hear this verse about if you want to save your life, you'll lose it, and if you lose your life for Christ's sake, you'll save it. It's often been heard as glorifying martyrdom. If you want to be certain of heaven, be a Christian martyr. As a result, some people have actively sought death as a martyr. It seems to me that the next verse, often quoted to reinforce that understanding, actually

weakens that interpretation. The next verse says, "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life, their soul, their self?" The Greek here can mean soul, life, or self. In the popular understanding of Hell, you don't lose your soul, you don't lose your life. Instead, your soul, your life is quite alive, but in great torment. You can't torment or torture that which is dead!

So, perhaps there's a way of understanding this passage that is closer to the text. Sometimes a person suffers a tragic loss such as losing everything in a house fire, losing immediate family members in a sudden and tragic way, or having a prosperous family business collapse and fail. When that happens, a person can give up. They can lose all hope, all ambition, all feeling. After a while they may recover and look back and say, "All life went out of me. I was a dead man for months after the tragedy." For a time, they forfeit their life. They surrender their life because it has no meaning, no purpose. Jesus asks the question here, "What do you accomplish if you acquire everything and you surrender all purpose and meaning in the process?" What have you gained?

A few weeks ago I ran across this particular comic strip. I was impressed with how clearly this strip illustrates this passage of Scripture.

Have you ever asked yourself, "What's the meaning of life?" Let me suggest some things that are not the meaning of life. Rolex watches, forty pairs of shoes, designer clothes, cruise ship vacations, symphony tickets, rich friends, reality programs, fame and recognition, a bigger house, cable TV, gourmet food and fine wine. There's nothing wrong with any of these things, but if you expect them to put meaning in your life, you'll end up being disappointed. Have them. Enjoy them. But don't be driven to acquire them, nor expect from them what they cannot deliver.

If you want to save your life, if you want to have a real life, if you want to really live, not just drift aimlessly, then you need to lose, get rid of, shuck off, the pointless and even harmful obsessions that fill your days and consume your energy. I don't remember what my grandmother wore – I remember how she loved me. I don't remember my grandfather's watch, but I remember the time he spent reading to me. My high school chemistry teacher drove an old car and lived in a small apartment, but he cared deeply that I learn to my full potential and was a giant influence on me. Our most precious memories are of relationships, not events. What has given our life meaning are people more than things. There's more security in deep friendships than in deep pockets.

Too Much Coffee Man illustrates how busyness, money, and material goods can get in the way and crowd out meaning from our lives. But it doesn't show the other side of the coin. What do we gain if we lose our lives and save them, what do we gain if we shuck off the cultural influence all around us and live our lives on the path that Jesus walked? Every once in a while I think we see the answer to that question. When you see the look of appreciation on someone's face when you walk into their hospital room, you feel like you've done something worthwhile, that you've made a difference. When you hand a plate of food through the window at Cooperative Community Ministries to someone who is hungry, you see the look of gratitude and hear the words of thanks. You know that you've brought a little moment of peace and joy to someone's life.

Notice the core of the rebuke that Jesus gives to Peter. "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Return to your Creator. Return to the self you were made to be. Reclaim your life. Lose the distractions, the greed, the envy, the self-centeredness. Lose the idols that distract you from God, and lead you down paths that are unworthy of the gifts that God has given you. Fine goods, great entertainment, and the applause of others are not evil. But, when we hold them too tightly, they really have a hold on us. We lose our self in that which begins to control our life, that which becomes our idol. Jesus tells Peter and us to devote our attention and our energy to divine things. Value the divine over the common. Assign value with clear vision, never forgetting where the greatest value lies.

We really don't want to talk much about the suffering mentioned in this text. The point of this passage is not that suffering is good or that we must suffer in order to be good Christians. Rather, if we follow the path where Christ leads us, the path that Christ walked, then there may be opportunities where our living in love and proclaiming love will be counter to the agenda of others around us. In a culture such as ours, where the rights, freedom, and independence of the individual are so highly valued, a

message of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves seems strange and goes against the flow of our common assumptions. In a world where we are afraid of the stranger, concerned that the stranger might be a terrorist or an economic competitor, the message of hospitality sounds strange. If we proclaim and live a message of forgiveness instead of vengeance, compassion rather than blame, sharing more than hoarding, and good will rather than competitiveness, we will not be running with the herd. And that may upset some people. Anybody can live a life of meaningless conformity. Christ offers and expects more than that. Amen.