



Suffering, Rejection, Execution?
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38
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The idea of losing is counter to what American culture defines as desirable. When you think of sport teams, contests, or any effort you make, the idea of losing makes you cringe. In a world where winning means everything and losing is not only disgraceful but also demeaning, who wants to *be* a loser? Who wants to be *with* a loser?

And yet, that is what Jesus calls us to do: to follow him who is journeying towards Jerusalem and the cross, and to lose our life for him and the gospel. If we want to be comfortable and safe then this path is not for us. If we want to decide what gets shared and how it gets shared and with whom it gets shared – we are following the wrong one.

But let's go back to the Book of Genesis.

Abraham is ninety nine years oof age. That's pretty old, wouldn't you say? He is 99 and not 19. Yet, God promises him a future. And still God has expectations of him. What is God asking of the elderly in our churches? What does it mean to keep on hoping at our age after all we have seen and experienced? How do faith and hope still bear charity?

On this text, Jonathan Sacks provides an eloquent summation: "Faith is the ability to live with delay without losing trust in the promise; to experience disappointment without losing hope, to know that the road between the real and the ideal is long and yet be willing to undertake the journey. That was Abraham's and Sarah's faith."

The passage from the gospel of Mark is the very heart of the story of Jesus, the axis on which the plot turns, this dramatic moment at Caesarea

Philippi, far to the north, on the border, amidst a number of temples honoring the self-declared god, Caesar.¹ It is here that Jesus turns his face to Jerusalem. He's been a powerful, impressive healer so far. From now on, he is passive, acted upon, handed over.

It's here that Jesus asks his disciples who people are saying he is. They respond John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet. Then Jesus asks them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah.

They have been following Jesus and witnessing miracles, from healing to feeding thousands of people with what appear to be insufficient resources. They have selected their leader wisely, and now he has admitted that yes, he is the one, though they aren't supposed to tell anyone. That must feel like a winning moment for the disciples.

Right after this revelation, Jesus launches in with what will happen next: suffering, rejection, execution. All of this is so unexpected that the disciples probably can't absorb what he says about rising after three days. Peter takes him aside to let him know that this isn't the way a winner should speak. How is he going to make any headway and attract more disciples if he keeps talking this way?

Safety and dreams of glory can be a temptation for us even today. Think about it: if we stopped doing what is right (being inclusive and offering hospitality to *all*, advocating for justice, speaking truth to power), wouldn't we get more people in the pews? Wouldn't everybody be happy? I don't think so. Only those who are happy with the status quo would. But if we worried about being quiet, not rocking the boat and making waves, hoping to gain in acceptance if not in numbers, would we not be avoiding the gospel and denying him, Jesus, who has brought a divisive sword?²

So, instead of backtracking, Jesus rebukes Peter in the harshest way, calling him Satan. Jesus will not be tempted to turn away, and doubles down on his message about denying oneself to follow him. He clearly mentions taking up a cross, evoking crucifixion, an ignoble way to die.

¹ [The Temple of Caesar Augustus at Caesarea Philippi \(develisys.com\)](http://develisys.com)

² Matt 10:34-36

What a whiplash for the disciples, to first find that they are following the right person and then learn that doing so will cost them everything.

Jesus is not literally telling his disciples to seek suffering but rather encouraging them to embrace what is already happening. The disciples are not gaining riches, nor are they walking the halls of fame and power. They have already lost all they had to follow Jesus, dropping everything and leaving their fishing nets and their families when they answered his call, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

Jesus' mission wasn't to impress, heal everybody, and attract a big zealous following. He came to save, to love, to lay down his life, to suffer for and with us and redeem us and all creation.

No passive spectators allowed here. From the sidelines, we'll just *admire* Jesus for suffering "in our place." Jesus says "Take up your cross and follow me." Not watch, but make the walk to death row and suffering with me. This "taking up your cross" is not simply bearing ones' burdens. In the Roman world, if you picked up your cross, you were on death row toward your execution. Such is the cost of discipleship.

Following Jesus will be costly – because we follow in a world that is terribly out of sync with Jesus, a culture that does not love the Lord. If you think the cost of discipleship is too high, what will you think of the cost of non-discipleship? Would you rather lose your life for not following him?

I like Chris Green's thought: "Jesus" (by turning away) "moves so that Peter cannot fail to be where he should be! By turning away, Jesus not only prefigures the turn; he actually accomplishes it. And this is always the way of God's wrath. In spite of appearances, the divine judgment is always, at its heart, only ever mercy. Yes, God turns his back on us. But never to put us in our place. Only ever to help us find it."³

May we endure in our discipleship and follow Jesus. May we be found ready when he comes in his glory. Amen.

³ Chris Green, *Being Transfigured: Lenten Homilies*