

**Following Jesus all the way - Second weekend of Lent,**  
Gen 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Rom 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38  
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One TV-preacher in the USA, Benny Hinn, Praise-a-Thon, TBN, 2nd April 1991, said:

Years ago they used to preach, 'O, we are going to walk on streets of gold.' I would say, 'I don't need the gold up there. I've got to have it down here'.

In his book, *Rise and Be Healed!* (1991, p. 14, 32, 62, 65) the same man says:

There will be no sickness for the saint of God. He promises to heal all- every one, any, any whatsoever, everything- all our diseases! That means not even a headache, sinus problem, not even a toothache- nothing! No sickness should come your way. God's greatest desire for the church of Jesus Christ is that we be in total and perfect health. If your body belongs to God, it does not and cannot belong to sickness.

I have the tendency to shout these lines... That is often how these ideas are presented. Maybe people think that their ideas are more credible if your shout?

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? That is the subject of the Gospel reading of today. It is clear from what we have read, that our apostle Peter was initially clueless about the Gospel and about the meaning of following Jesus – and this is worrying.

Worrying for us as well. Jesus began to show what the Gospel entailed; the students of Jesus did not get the point.

Is it possible to be with Jesus, to hear from Jesus, to see Jesus, and still be clueless about the message of God for us today? Is it possible to go to Church for years, and still not comprehend the essence of the Gospel of our Lord? The answer seems to be 'yes'.

### **Death and resurrection of Christ**

For us who believe in the Biblical testimony, there should be no doubt about the heart of the Gospel. Jesus began to show his disciples that He *had to go* to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised again. Since the earliest days of the Church, we confess:

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day He rose again.

This is the heart of the Gospel and the deepest expression of the love of God. It is the necessary and only basis for the forgiveness of sins that God offers to us. The cross of Christ is where we look God in the eye. That is where He reveals himself as the gracious God. Peter and the other disciples could not understand it. Actually, for them to not *understand* it was not so strange. How *can* we *understand* the Gospel? Compre-

hension of this painful and loving deed of the Lord Jesus Christ is beyond any of us.

But Peter went much further than *not understanding*. He *rejected* the very words of Jesus. If we do not understand, that is one thing, that happens a lot to me. But we are on very dangerous ground if we reject the words of Jesus.

The evangelist Mark, who would later be the interpreter for St Peter, heard this story from Peter himself. He penned down: 'Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him.'

Such strong language! Peter rebuked Jesus! What Jesus had just announced, that He 'must suffer many things at the hands of the elders and chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed', was diametrically opposed to the worldview of Peter and his friends.

So Peter sets the theological facts straight for Jesus. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to You." Peter had been brought up with the idea that the Messiah would come with power, glory, conquest. He would be one of health and wealth! The idea of a suffering Messiah was simply inconceivable.

Just hours before, Peter had confessed that he believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. And upon that confession, Jesus had said:

You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of Hades [the underworld] will never overpower it.

Now that was language that Peter liked, language of victory and power, not language of suffering. It is not so strange that Peter, hours later, believed that he has to make Jesus understand that all this talk of weakness, suffering, death, was not suitable for the Messiah.

A very natural approach of Peter, a very human approach. If someone is God's chosen person, a prophet, the Messiah, the Son of God, how in the world is it conceivable that God would ever allow, let alone want, such good person to suffer and be killed?

Islam has the same approach. You can read of this in the fourth chapter of the Qur'an, called *al-Nisaa'* (the women). In response to the Jewish bragging: 'Surely we killed Christ Jesus, son of Mary, the apostle of God'. The Qur'an then says:

...but they killed him not and they crucified him not. (*Wamaa qataluuhu wa ma salabuuhu*)

They killed him not and they crucified him not, but, says the Qur'an, 'a resemblance of Him was presented to them.' God did send someone who looked like Jesus and he was crucified and buried instead of Jesus, is what

Islam teaches. How could God ever allow his servant Jesus, to suffer!

So when the Jews wanted to kill Jesus, they actually crucified someone who looked like him. But Jesus himself was not killed; He was taken up, directly into heaven.

This is 'natural theology', human, logical thinking, this is the story as we would have written it. But it is not the storyline of God.

Peter offered Jesus a logical way of escape from what God wanted Him to do, an escape from the suffering and death than was part of the plan of God. Peter's idea, and the concepts of Islam, deny our only chance of salvation through the God-given Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose for our justification.

In *Surah Yunus*, also from the Qur'an, this concept that God will not let his servants suffer, is further explained:

Behold! The friends of Allah shall certainly have no fear nor shall they grieve - Those who believe and were ever righteous - For them are glad tidings in the present life and also in the Hereafter.

For friends of Allah there is no fear or grief in this life, only glad tidings; this is what the Qur'an teaches. Would that be nice!

It sounds nice, but in reality it is a sad message. Because turn it around: if you fear, if you have grief, if you suffer, if you have problems, it is because you are not a good servant of God, and this is exactly the idea that we do often hear – even among Christians.

This concept is destructive for you and I, and for all people, because the reality is: most of us have lives full of problems. Full of them. And that is normal! Does this mean that God is far from you, punishing you because you are not a good Christian? No ofcourse not.

### **Following Jesus is costly**

I think Peter understood very well, that if he had to follow a Lord who would be persecuted, killed, and buried, that this would also impact his own life. I think that is exactly why Jesus immediately after Peter rebuked his for speaking of Jesus' death, explained that following Him is costly.

There is not other way. Following Jesus is the answer to God's free offer of salvation – but following him *has a price*. He saves us by grace, and grace alone, but that grace is only available if we follow Jesus' example to serve God; we must *also* deny ourselves, take up our cross, and lose our own life. There is no way around this.

This is the lifestyle of the Christian, but this is not language that every Christian likes or that every Christian lives by. Our Christian bookshops and many Christian TV programs are full of books and programs that prefer the life of glamour and success, health and wealth, over a Biblical lifestyle and a Biblical worldview.

It is much nicer to promise your audience gold than to promise a cross.

What a shame that in the Church this Gospel of prosperity is being preached. We should know better because the teaching of Jesus and his apostles was so different!

That the disciples had difficulties to understand this, *before* Jesus died and rose again and *before* they received the Holy Spirit is not so surprising. But if *we* do not understand this today, it is strange, because we have his Word, and we have received the Holy Spirit of God and the teaching of the church of 20 centuries.

It is not possible to be a Christian and to follow Christ Jesus without denying ourselves and losing our lives as *we* would like to design them.

William Hendriksen, in his *New Testament Commentary on Mathew* (Grand Rapids, 1973), p. 656:

A person who denies himself, gives up all reliance on whatever he is by nature, and depends for salvation on God alone. He no longer seeks to promote his own predominantly selfish interests but has become wrapped up in the cause of promoting the glory of God in his own and in every life, and also in every sphere of endeavor.

Being related to the one whom mankind rejected and who suffered, and living for the honor of God like Jesus did, can only lead to us also experiencing some measure of that rejection and suffering that was his part.

Being a Christian gives us great joy, because we are related to our Holy Father in heaven. But it does not mean the absence of problems in life. We may expect that the servant will be treated as the Master. And this comes on top of the normal problems of life that we suffer together with all other people, poverty, sickness and all other things.

Jesus suffered and died. So we can be assured that He understands us. He suffered the same miseries, and in the midst of the darkness of our problems, He is with us. If your pit is deep, He is there with you.

### **God with us**

Pain, misery, problems in work, family problems, sickness, nothing of this means that God has left us. In the midst of all this, Christ is present. Even when we are in our lowest spot.

How great then, to deny ourselves and to follow Christ. For that is what is central in our Christian life. To be with Him and to do what He says.

So we are not without hope. The promise of a happy, healthy and wealthy life today may offer a semblance of hope for a short time – but the preachers of that prosperity gospel can never deliver what they promise. Never, because their promise is empty talk.

### **Conclusion**

But being with Christ is the best there is, in all circumstances. He never leaves us, and gives us great hope. He will deliver on all of His promises, at the right time.

For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and *then* He will repay everyone for what has been done.

How great to look forward to the time when He will wipe away the tears from our eyes. I look forward to meeting our Lord Jesus Christ; but in the meantime, He calls us to follow Him, to serve him in our jobs, in our families, in our church, even when that is costly.

His own suffering shows that even pain can lead to gain. So we should not be too worried by the problems in life, but rather focus on Him, on his tremendous eternal promises, and follow Him today.

+ In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit