

discipleship in verses 34 to 38. To begin with, Jesus taught; 'If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.' (8:34). This self denial was Jesus' own experience, of course, for He had been forced to 'deny Himself' by refusing to accept the acclamation 'Messiah', for all the reasons we have seen above. However, by accepting God's will in this way, God's purpose of salvation would be achieved through the path of suffering. Jesus went on to say that those who followed Him would have to walk the same path as Himself; what He said about death and resurrection was clear, in particular the famous words; 'Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life because of me and the Gospel, will save it.' (8:35).

Now, if you heard this for the first time, you might imagine that Jesus was saying you would have to face death and resurrection in the same way Jesus faced it. However in the last two verses of our passage, Jesus began to teach in a completely different way, talking about the eternal consequences of the decisions that we make now. He was not telling His disciples that their road would be identical to His, but rather that the consequences of their decision about whether to follow Jesus and accept the path of suffering would determine what happened to them 'when He comes in His Father's glory with the holy angels.' (8:38).

All of these themes are new to Mark's Gospel and from now until the story of Jesus' own death, Mark tells us more and more about what Jesus said to explain these important things.

Application

It is hard for us to read this passage of Scripture and not accept that in a very real way, Jesus' direct teaching is addressed personally to us. It also raises huge questions about why it is that God should require Jesus to suffer for us, and also ask us to suffer with Jesus so that the world can be saved. Part of the answer to this is provided in what Jesus says in verses 36 and 37. All the good things of life are as nothing compared to the glories of what lies beyond our own death in eternity, and we cannot take the benefits of life with us. Whether we like it or not and whatever our earthly life holds, death is always our ultimate foe; but Jesus offers us a path to eternal life and choices to make which will give us the assurance of this eternal life. What is needed is for us to identify with Jesus now, and decide to be His followers.

Suffering and rejection are a feature of all life, and although we all try to live in such a way as to avoid it, this is the nature of the life we all have on earth. Moreover, it is a plain fact of life that often, much good comes from suffering. People are capable of learning how to prevent it and help those who suffer, and this can be a force for good in the world. All of this is a reflection of the spiritual truths which Jesus taught in this passage and which He lived out to the very end. However, suffering remains a fact of life, and personally, we deal with these things sometimes well and sometimes badly. All of us have come across those who cannot accept the suffering that has come to them, especially when it is through no fault of their own; and their lives are certainly not happy. By accepting Jesus' challenge to 'take up our cross', we accept that suffering is part of life, indeed as a Christian we may well suffer more because of our faith. Nevertheless, if we are not 'ashamed of Him' (8:38), then we have every reason to believe that God will bring us through our own eventual death to be with Him in glory!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your group, discuss the feelings Peter might have had throughout this passage.
2. How does verse 35 affect you? Is this a good summary of the Gospel? What else must be included for a good summary of the Gospel (if at all)?
3. Why is it necessary for us to 'deny ourselves' in order to follow Jesus, and what does this mean?

Discipleship

The challenge of this passage of Scripture will affect us all in different ways. As an exercise in discipleship, I suggest reading through this passage several times and dwelling on each stage of what is said. Sometimes it is unwise to presume too much on what God will say to us until we have given Him time to say it! As the passage which stand at the centre of Mark's Gospel, it is best to allow God to speak to us as He will.

Final Prayer

We commit into Your hands this day, Lord God, the troubles and trials we each experience. We ask for Your protection against all the evils of the world which affect us in our homes and churches. By the power of Your Holy Spirit, lead us out of darkness into Your great light, we pray: AMEN

Prayer

Almighty God, Lord of life, of love, of peace, and hope; we worship You this day because we know we owe You everything. By the power of Your love, complete in us the work of salvation which you have already begun and of which we have the guarantee through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. May everything we do be pleasing to You, and may we never shirk the responsibilities of our faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Bible and the Church

Pray to thank God for those who have kept alive the highest standards of scholarship in maintaining and interpreting the ancient scrolls, documents and fragments from which we piece together the 'original' text of the Bible. Without their work neither we, nor anyone else in the world would have an accurate translation of the Bible in their own language.

Meditation

Stay beside us, Lord Jesus, throughout the day:
Bless us in each moment, each activity and each conversation.

Go with us where we go;
Surround us with Your love;
And help us find You in every situation.
Show us the truth within all that happens;
Guide us as we make decisions;
And build us up in maturity and wisdom.
Restore us as we relax with those we love;
Protect us and our families from evil;
And give us good rest when we sleep.

Be in our hearts, Lord Jesus, throughout each day:
Bless us, and may we treasure Your presence, each day.

Bible Study - Mark 8:27-38

²⁷ Jesus and His disciples then went on to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way He asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' ²⁸ They replied, 'John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and yet others, one of the prophets.' ²⁹ Then He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter replied, 'You are the Messiah.' ³⁰ But He told them most strongly not to tell anyone about Him.

³¹ Then He began to teach them that it was necessary for the Son of Man to suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priestly family and the scribes, and that He would be killed and rise again after three days. ³² He spoke openly about this. Then Peter took Him to one side and began to rebuke Him. ³³ But turning and looking at His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are thinking not about the things of God, but the concerns of people.'

³⁴ Then He summoned the crowd and His disciples and told them, 'If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life because of me and the Gospel, will save it. ³⁶ What does it achieve for a man to gain the whole world only to lose his life? ³⁷ And what can a man give in exchange for his life? ³⁸ Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this age of unfaithfulness and sin, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His Father's glory with the holy angels.'

Review

These extraordinary verses of Scripture go to the heart of the Gospel of Mark. Although the different paragraphs (8:27-30; 8:31-33; 8:34-9:1) could each be studied independently, each of them is important. If we are to understand what Mark wanted to say in his Gospel and the issues at stake for Jesus at this point in His ministry, then we must read the passage as a whole.

The event at Caesarea Philippi was crucial to God's work through Jesus, and after it, Jesus' relationship with the disciples could never be the same. Firstly, Jesus asked them who other people said He was, and then He asked them what they thought themselves (8:27-30). However, when Peter declared 'You are the Messiah' (8:29), people would not have expected Jesus to ask for the matter to be kept quiet (8:30)! Neither would they have expected Jesus to say that he was going to suffer! Peter spoke for everyone around him when he told Jesus that what he said was not acceptable (8:32), but Jesus' strong rebuke forced all those who were present to think again. There could be no mistake; if Jesus was to complete His work as the Messiah, there was only one way it could be done (8:34f.).

Jesus had taken His disciples on a journey of about 30 to 40 miles north east of Lake Galilee to the very foothills of Mount Hermon and a region of villages and towns generally known as 'Caesarea Philippi'. The disciples went with Jesus, naturally, but the crowd who appear here (8:34f.) must have been local people as well as those who had travelled with Jesus, and we can assume that many of those present had witnessed some of Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing. Jesus asked the disciples His first question (8:27) while they were still travelling; and the theme of travelling recurs again later as Jesus challenged those who were following him about the path they would have to walk if they were to continue to follow Him (8:34-38).

The whole reading, however, is about what kind of Messiah people were expecting and what kind of Messiah God had given in the person of Jesus Christ. When the disciples first responded to Jesus' question, 'Who do people say that I am?' they gave the answers that were safe, but consistent both with what had happened in Jesus' ministry and also the way people had responded to it; 'John the Baptist ... Elijah ... one of the prophets' (8:28). The truth was that most people expected a Messiah who would come and immediately display supreme authority in the world, sweeping away empires and emperors who claimed Israel, and re-establishing the throne of David and the worship of God in Jerusalem. Despite everything Jesus had done, He had not shown any inclination to do this, and when challenged by the Pharisees about this (8:11-13), He had walked away. People hoped and expected that Jesus might be the Messiah and undoubtedly talked about it, but from their point of view, the evidence did not yet 'add up'.

It was Peter who broke the deadlock of spiritual misunderstanding not by perceiving everything perfectly, but by being prepared to go out on a limb and say what was on everyone's lips 'You are the Messiah' (8:29). Then Jesus, aware of the false hopes all around Him, immediately taught the disciples the spiritual truth (8:31-33). God's Messiah as foretold by the prophets was the 'suffering servant' prophesied by Isaiah (see Isaiah 53). When Peter failed to accept this, Jesus' rebuke was shatteringly direct; 'Get behind me, Satan!' Jesus could not abide any compromise with God's plan of salvation; His focus was exclusively on its execution, which was a battle of good against evil in which all opposition to God had to be defeated.

If we read carefully, then we will notice that Jesus was in fact kind to Peter, for when Jesus rebuked him, He averted His gaze and looked away to the disciples (8:33), dismissing the sin rather than the sinner. Lastly, He taught the crowds about God's path of salvation, and He said plainly that he would indeed fulfil the role of Messiah (8:34, 9:1).

Going Deeper

Jesus did not want the disciples fostering the wrong ideas about God's work to save the world, so He to strike a delicate balance. He needed the disciples to recognise that He was indeed God's anointed, but not the Messiah people expected; He would have nothing to do with such talk. This explains what happens within our reading, but there is still a great deal for us to learn from what Jesus said at this crucial point in His ministry.

'Who do people say that I am? ... Who do you say that I am?'

Jesus' subtle two-way approach to the question at the heart of the whole Gospel is fascinating. He first drew the disciples into telling Him honestly what the general gossip was about Him and His ministry, before posing the open and direct question to the disciples which went to the heart of the matter; 'who do you say that I am?' Even to this day, many are happy to talk about Jesus but not give a personal response to this question! What the disciples told Jesus was not exactly positive, although it sounded complimentary. For people to say that Jesus was 'John the Baptist' displayed the opinion that Jesus was another 'forerunner', and not the real thing; certainly not the Messiah; and comments about Jesus' being 'Elijah' or 'one of the prophets' (8:28) were alternative ways of saying the same thing. These were not casual observations; they exposed the truth of what was happening. The people who accompanied Jesus wanted

Him to be the Messiah of their expectations (see above) rather than someone who fulfilled God's plans as revealed through the prophets.

It is impossible for us to be sure what Peter really thought when he responded to Jesus' next question by saying 'You are the Messiah!' Some believe that Peter also wanted Jesus to show His hand as the authoritative Messiah the people wanted, and Jesus knew this and responded accordingly. This is not the picture we gain from the other Gospels however. In Matthew, Jesus responds with joy to what Peter has said and immediately says that the future of the whole church will depend on this kind of faith (Matt 16:17f.), and we have no reason to doubt that this happened. Mark did not include this in his Gospel because it was focussed exclusively on what kind of Messiah Jesus was, so he reported Jesus' instruction 'not to tell anyone about Him.' (8:30 - a comment which comes later in Matthew's Gospel, 16:20).

What Peter said and Jesus' response, however, was the starting point for the remarkable series of events which took place next. After preventing the disciples from saying anything further, Jesus proceeded to teach them 'openly' (8:32) about the path of suffering and rejection that the 'Son of Man' would have to endure. The contrast in this passage is severe. On the one hand, Jesus maintained the prohibition on people telling others about Him that He had required of almost all those who had met Him since the beginning of His ministry (see, for example, 1:43,44; 2:32, 7:36), but on the other hand, He began to teach the disciples openly about the truth of the coming suffering of the Messiah, without using parables! (see 4:33,34) It certainly appears that Jesus simply would not allow Himself to be called the Messiah because this would have raised people's hopes for a worldly salvation which God was not going to give them. Jesus never did say 'I am the Messiah', probably for this reason. The truth about what God was doing to bring salvation was far more important than the name 'Messiah'. Indeed, Jesus appears to have preferred to describe Himself as the 'Son of Man' (8:31), partly to make clear that He would not live up to false expectations.

The sharpness of the exchanges which took place indicate how seriously Jesus took all this. The Greek word for 'rebuke' (8:32,33) means 'to instruct someone not to do something', and is in fact the same word used by Jesus to tell the disciples to keep quiet (8:30). In this one incident is encapsulated the heart of Jesus' battle against the evil of following popular concerns instead of God's will, and although it was clearly a difficult event for Peter, the evidence of Peter's later greatness in the church is that he learned the truth about how wrong he was. He had taken the first step which allowed Jesus to start teaching about Himself as the true Messiah and 'Son of Man', but there was still a great deal more for him to learn on his journey of faith.

The teaching

Even though it is disrupted by the incident with Peter, the teaching which Jesus began to give showed that a new phase had begun in his ministry. Along with the crucial words of verse 32; 'He spoke openly about this', Mark records that Jesus not only taught the disciples, but 'summoned the crowd' (8:34) as well! The teaching in this passage is some of the most famous that Jesus gave in the whole of His ministry, because it speaks directly about what He would have to do in order to complete His work, and also the path all His followers would have to follow in order to gain eternal life. Earlier in Mark's Gospel, Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God using parable (4:1-34), but apart from what He said in various disputes with the Pharisees (2:8-11; 3:20-30; 7:6-23) nothing like this was said. Indeed, the frankness of what Jesus said is itself startling.

Initially, Jesus spoke about suffering, because as Isaiah had foretold from Israel's own experience, evil could only be defeated by facing it with all its consequences head on. Jesus therefore had to face death Himself, as the 'Son of Man', and the only way to show victory over evil was to 'rise again after three days' (8:31). This part of what Jesus said was prophetic and clear; it did happen. The people who first heard Jesus say this may well have been stunned (as Peter clearly was) but the manner of His rejection was also scandalous. We are too used to the story of Jesus' passion to realise how shocking it would have been to those who first heard that the people who would be responsible for this scandal would be; 'the elders, the chief priestly family and the scribes' (8:31). The people of Jesus' day were generally suspicious about the 'high priestly family' who ruled Judaism from Jerusalem. This was indeed one extended family headed by the one 'High Priest', and they were involved in both the running of the Temple in Jerusalem and also the Roman system of governance which kept Israel within the Roman Empire. They were not universally liked; but in general, the community 'elders' and the 'scribes' were not seen as the enemy!

This is the first time that Jesus had spoken about His own death and resurrection, and we will discover in coming passages of Mark's Gospel that He went on to say more. The second remarkable feature of Jesus' teaching at this point is His clear and vivid description of the path of