

*From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.*

<sup>22</sup> *Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"*

<sup>23</sup> *Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."*

<sup>24</sup> *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. <sup>26</sup> What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:21-26)*

### What is Your Life Worth?

**What is your life worth?** How much would you be willing to pay to save your life? If you faced a medical crisis and the treatments far outstripped your insurance and your ability to pay, would you begin to ask if it was worth it? You might not want to destroy your spouse's or your children's financial health. You might not want to be a burden on your family. You might not want your spouse to ruin his or her health caring for you and carting you to one doctor after another. What is your life worth? There are other situations where that question might come up. When you find yourself in those situations, you realize that there is a limit to what our life is worth. The gospel lesson that we have before us today forces us to answer that question.

#### I.

Several years ago, a friend was telling me about their financial situation. He and his wife were deep in debt. Their youngest child was born prematurely. The doctors undertook heroic measures to save that little girl's life. It cost far more than their insurance would cover. They went deeper and deeper into debt every day. But he told me, "You didn't even think about that." All that mattered was saving his daughter's life. They've spent years paying those medical bills but that child's life is still worth it to them.

And our life is worth it to God. That's the point Jesus was making. He began to explain to his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the political and spiritual leaders of the Jewish people. The disciples already knew that those leaders hated Jesus. They had seen it over and over again. Jesus was telling them that he had to let them torture him. He had to go to Jerusalem and be killed by them. And then he had to be raised again to life. Why? Because he valued our lives more than he valued his own. Jesus came into this world to die because that's what we needed him to do. And he never hesitated. We mean that much to him.

Jesus knew how hard these words were for his disciples to hear. They loved him and they didn't want to think about him being tortured and murdered. But they needed to understand this. They needed to hear the last thing, that he would rise. But sadly, they couldn't get past the torture and murder part. Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him. He said, "**Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!**" Then Jesus said: "**Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.**" Wow! Jesus called Peter "Satan." That's a pretty harsh thing to say. It wasn't just name calling Peter was acting like the devil. He was trying to stop God's plan. But did you catch the thing Jesus said after that? "**You are a stumbling block to me.**" The Greek word translated here as "stumbling block" means a trap or a snare. Jesus was saying that Peter was tempting him, the Lord and Savior, to abandon his mission, to care more for his own life than he cared for us.

If you remember last week, Peter was the disciple who confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." He went from confessing faith in the promised Savior to trying to stop Jesus from completing his mission. Why? Peter still believed Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. But Jesus said, "**You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.**" Peter was not thinking of a Savior the way God was. He didn't see how Jesus could be tortured and die and still win. He still had that Jewish idea of the

Messiah raising an army and driving out the Romans and conquering the world. And as long as Peter was thinking like that, he could not think like God thought. So he could only interfere with God's plan to save us.

Could we ever fall into that trap? Obviously, we aren't going to tell Jesus not to go to Jerusalem to die. But it is very possible for us to lose sight of what that means. Why did Jesus die? Many people today think that it was to give us an example of what real love is. There is some truth to that. But by itself, that idea implies that if we love like he did, if we sacrifice ourselves like he did, we'll get to heaven. No matter how much we sacrifice ourselves, we cannot do enough to reach heaven. Many people think that Jesus came to teach us how to live a moral life. In our time, that translates into teaching us how to keep our kids off drugs and how to foster family values and how to respect the opinions and beliefs of others. But that's not why he died. When we view Jesus as anything other than the Savior who gave his life to free us from death and hell, we have in mind the things of men, not the things of God.

Lest you think that we would never fall into that trap, remember: Jesus not was talking to a Pharisee. He was talking to a man who had spent almost three years listening to him but who still failed to understand why Jesus wanted to die. And it can happen to us. When I talk to a family who's just lost someone they love, and I talk about the faith of that person, many times, someone will say that they know that person is in heaven because he was such a good father or she was such a wonderful mother. They'll talk about how good and decent and caring they were. But you know what? No matter how wonderful those memories are, none of that gets us to heaven – and only an unbeliever would think that it does. Honesty demands that we recognize how often the sinner in our hearts grabs control of our minds and we think like unbelievers.

But honesty is only the beginning. Trust is the ending. Jesus came here to die – and to rise. That death was our death. God built hell itself into that death on the cross. That death pays for all our sins, for all the things that keep our best efforts from being good enough. It pays for the sin in our hearts that continually looks to our own efforts to reach heaven. When Jesus rose, God assured us that all our sin is gone. Death is no longer the trap door that drops us down to hell. Now it's the passageway that leads us straight to eternal life. Only Jesus' love could drive him to die for us. He died for Peter who was trying to keep him from doing it. He died for Peter whom he called Satan and a stumbling block. Jesus loved him even when poor Peter was obsessed with the thoughts of men. He died for us, because he loves us that much too. Like my friend who didn't even think about the cost when his daughter was born early, Jesus was willing to pay anything and everything to save our lives. **What is your life worth? Jesus valued our lives more than his own life.**

## II.

The value that Jesus placed on us has not only won eternal life for us, it also changed us. When God gives us faith, he builds into us a desire to live for Christ. That's where Jesus does serve as an example for us. But we can only begin to follow that example when we trust that he has washed away all our failures and has given us eternal life through his great act of love. Then our lives here are an exercise in following him in love. Just as he valued our lives more than his own, we need to change the worth that we attach to our lives here.

Jesus He said, **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”** If you want to follow Jesus, there will be consequences in this life. No matter how much our society says that it's OK to get hammered as long as you have a designated driver or it's OK to leave your spouse if you're not happy, or it's OK to gossip as long as you tell the truth, God says all those things are wrong. To follow Jesus, we have to deny ourselves. We have to sacrifice the sinful pleasures of this life for the better pleasures of the life to come.

In fact, Jesus says that we have to take up our cross in order to follow him. The cross is any hardship or hurt that challenges our faith. We need the cross. Without the cross, we can't follow Jesus. There is a price to be paid because we live in a sinful world. When we get to heaven, it will be easy to be faithful. But down here, it will always be hard because living for Christ means going against the grain of our society. It means standing up to the attacks of the devil. It means crushing our own sinful desires – denying ourselves – and living as Christ calls us to because he is our Savior.

So God sends the cross to purify our faith. The devil, of course, takes advantage of the cross to try to drive a wedge between us and God. He succeeds sometimes because instead of trusting that God sends every hurt and sorrow for our good, we in our sinful weakness and our sinful arrogance demand that God treat us better. And if he doesn't, well, we'll show him. We won't trust him anymore! But that's all our fault. God always sends the cross to strengthen us. When we joyfully take up our cross, when we face the hurts and

sorrows of this life trusting that God loved us enough to send his Son to die for us, trusting that God knows what he's doing, trusting that God is doing all things for our good, our faith grows. God uses the hurt to burn weakness and sin out of our hearts. And he will have to do that for as long as we live here.

What Jesus says here flies in the face of everything that modern life teaches. Everything else in our society says that pain is bad. Comfort is good. Rest is good. Quality of life is the most important value, and if someone can't have it, then we should just put them out of their misery. But Jesus tells us that God sends pain because he loves us. And he uses that pain to drive us closer to him so that he can bring us home to heaven.

Jesus asks us, **“What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”** Do we treat the life to come as an afterthought? Do we spend so much time chasing after the comforts and the ambitions of this life that we put God in last place? I wonder that every time we try to find people to do work here at church, whether it's cleaning the school or serving on a board or whatever. When was the last time you sacrificed your time to come and help your congregation? How many times have you pleaded that you have too much work to do and too many other obligations to give a few hours to the Lord? How many of those obligations exist because you want to have two cars and a bigger house and lots of furniture and so on? Are we putting this life ahead of the life to come? It's so easy to make something else the focus of our lives and to give God the leftovers – the leftover money, the leftover time, the lowest priority. That sin threatens to destroy our faith and condemn us to hell forever.

But Jesus also said, **“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”** How do we lose our life for Jesus' sake? Through repentance and faith. We recognize the greedy and sinful attitudes of our hearts and we appeal to Christ for forgiveness. He gives it. Jesus died even for our failure to make serving him our priority. We lose our life for him when we gladly hear that message and we devote our lives to spreading it. And through that message God strengthens our faith and teaches us to sacrifice all treasure and comfort here so that message is heard. **What is your life worth? We need to value Jesus' gift of eternal life more than life here.**

If you've come through my catechism class or one of my Bible Information Classes, you've heard me ask this question before. But I'm going to ask it again. If you lived for one hundred years in this world, and everything was wonderful, if you had a great job and lots of money and good health and everybody loved you, but you died and went to hell, did you win? No. But if you lived for a hundred years here and it was all pain and sorrow, you were hungry and sick and people spit on you, but you died and went to heaven, did you win? Absolutely. This life is nothing compared to the life to come. Value that life. Value what Christ has won for you. Amen.