

The Greatness of Jesus' Sacrifice

I saw an online mental health article this week titled, *"It's Advent, and it's okay to be sad."* There is no question this Advent comes in a season of unique distress and divisiveness. In times like this, we often wonder why we are going through the things we are facing? How are we supposed to face these challenges? Where do we find the strength to do so? So as we continue the life of Jesus and focus on the greatness of Jesus this Advent, what I hope and believe you will find is that in him there is hope and real help for hard times. Yes, it is okay to feel the sadness that so many feel at this season, but there is a tremendous underlying strength that comes from the gospel. That is where the very real and practical healing power of this story comes through. It isn't found right on the surface of the story. You have to think about what this story means. And an important element in the story is the fact that we have to be willing to think differently than we would naturally. At the end of the story, Peter is rebuked for not setting his mind on the things of God, but of man. There is a lesson in that. ***When constrained by our limited human perspectives, we risk missing the greatness of Jesus and the greatness of his sacrifice.*** In this story **Mark 8**, we come to the first time Jesus clearly says he is going to suffer and die and rise again. This is the heart of the gospel. It is what we celebrate in the Lord's Supper. To understand it and its relevance to us we need to understand two things.

First,

I. WE HAVE TO UNDERSTAND WHO JESUS IS.

In **verses 27-30**, it says, *And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"²⁸ And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets."²⁹ And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ."*

It's worth thinking about the fact that...

A. It is easy to miss the true greatness of Jesus.

Look at all the different opinions people had about him in his own day. According to **verse 28**, some said, *John the Baptist; and others Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.* Those were all pretty positive comparisons and opinions, but they *all* fell short.

What makes this story even more pointed is that it takes place after two years in which the greatness of Jesus' was being revealed.

One way to remember the key movements in the ministry of Jesus is to think in terms of three phases of about one year each.

The first year was a year of inauguration. In the first year this beautiful life full of grace and truth is dramatically introduced. He is baptized by John. He is tempted in the desert but overcomes the devil. He turns the water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. That first miracle is symbolic of how he comes to bring new life. He cleanses the temple of corruption. He tells an upright religious man that he must be born again spiritually. He meets the woman at the well and offers her the water of life, eternal life for the asking.

The second year is the year of popularity. This is an extended time, it actually last for about fifteen months, during which Jesus continually reveals his incomparable greatness. He delivers *The Sermon on the Mount*, preaches and heals, calms the storms at sea, and raises the dead. He trains and sends out the twelve. His popularity is unheard of. He often has to withdraw to desolate places just to get away from the crowds for prayer and solitude. He has extended exposure to multitudes of people but *where does it lead?* After the miracle in which he feeds five thousand the popularity of his ministry in Galilee begins to collapse. When he says he is the bread of life many turn away. That was where we ended last week.

The third-year is the year of opposition. This story in **Mark 8** takes place as the year of opposition, really more like nine months, is just beginning. It all shows us that people can have a lot of exposure to Jesus and hold pretty positive ideas about Jesus and still fall far short of seeing his true greatness.

You see the thing is....

B. The True Greatness of Jesus is Incomparable.

Something in this story struck me for the first time this week. When I first read this, I thought the point about the various opinions of the people about Jesus was just that they were inadequate. But then I realized that while they were inadequate from a fuller Christian understanding. They were pretty great. It's actually hard to imagine that the ordinary Israelite could have used any stronger language in describing who they thought Jesus was.

They were saying Jesus must be as *great* as the greatest of all our

prophets. Think of that Isaiah and Jeremiah and Elijah. These were the most famous, holy servants of God in all history. They also saw something supernatural in him. Elijah had been miraculously caught up into heaven at the end of his earthly life. Some wondered if he had come back in Jesus. They equating Jesus with the very greatest supernatural legendary figures they knew of. But Jesus is not satisfied with that. He turns to the disciples and says, *What about you, who do you say that I am?* He wants them to see that his greatness transcends any comparison they can conceive of. Peter says *You are the Christ!* ¹

The word "**Christ**" is the Greek form of "messiah," which means "the anointed one." In the Bible, in the centuries before Jesus the custom was that priests and kings were be anointed with oil as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Oil was used for healing and as fuel for lamps, so it was a good symbol for the enlightening and healing presence of God's Spirit. The image was that the Holy Spirit was needed for a priest to connect people to God and a king to rule well for God. But the Bible taught that while others were gifted in part by the Holy Spirit, they were all only partial, and imperfect pictures of the ultimate promised one. From the dawn of time, God promised his people that one day the ultimate anointed servant of God, a gracious king of kings, a warrior priest, a suffering savior would come to save and rule. When Peter says, you are the Christ; he is saying you are the promised one.

There is a huge gap between all the opinions about Jesus in **verse 28** and the statement *You are the Christ* at the end of **verse 29**. Even the greatest of the prophets didn't talk about themselves. They were always pointing toward the future and another one yet to come. Jesus doesn't point to another one who will come. He points them and you to himself. He's not just a prophet. He's the Lord of the prophets. He is the theme of the prophets. He is the one to whom they looked and of whom they spoke. The people in Jesus day were comparing him to the greatest figures they could think of, and Jesus was showing them and us that he is even greater than any category of human comparison.

When the angel Gabriel announced the birth of Jesus to Mary in **Luke 1:32**, among many other wonderful things he said of Jesus, he said this, *He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High*. This idea of the true greatness of Jesus and the blindness of people to it plays out all through his life. In **John 4**, the woman at the well says, you are not greater than our father Jacob, are you? In **John 8**, the Pharisees say, "Surely, you are not greater than our Father Abraham? In **Matthew 12**, Jesus says the people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Later, he says, the queen of the south came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, but something greater than Solomon is here.

There are no categories of comparison we can come up for the greatness of Jesus. He is incomparable. **John 1** tells us the eternal word the second person of the Trinity, God, the Son became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory but when he came to his own and his own did not receive him. Paul writes about it in **1 Corinthians 2:7-8**, *But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.* They didn't see the greatness of who he was and is.

Do you see his greatness? *We light Advent candles because Jesus came into the world, bringing light into the darkness.* But St. Augustine was right when he said, *"it is of no advantage to be near the light if the eyes are closed."* Spiritual lukewarmness and indifference can dull our vision or lull us into just closing our own eyes to the true greatness of Jesus. Other issues, other things can distract us. *Do you see the greatness of Jesus?*

To understand the greatness of his sacrifice, we have to understand who he is and then secondly,

II. WE HAVE TO UNDERSTAND HOW JESUS SUFFERED.

Look at **verse 31**, *And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.*

The first thing to know about his suffering is this:

A. He suffered vicariously.

"Vicarious" a big word but a good one. It means *as a substitute*. To say he suffered vicariously means he suffered and died in our place, paying for our sins. You see this in the word "*must*." *The Son of Man must suffer many things.* Why *must* he? What makes it necessary?

Later in **Mark 10:45**, Jesus tells us he *came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.* A ransom is a price you pay to set someone free. Our sins place us under a judgment of condemnation. The promise made at the announcement of Jesus' birth is that he would save his people from their sins. To do that, he had to suffer the judgment we deserve. So he says, *I must suffer and die.*

Jesus is going to go to Jerusalem to die on the cross because the power of what happens on the cross is worth more than all of the awesome miracles he performed in the first two years of his ministry put together! Miracles cannot save your soul. We need a suffering Savior to save us from our sins.

Jesus suffered vicariously, in our place and for us. And...

B. He suffered terribly.

In **verse 31**, Jesus said, *the Son of man must suffer many things*. He did suffer many things, didn't he? Betrayed by one of his own, multiple beatings, spat on, mocked, the unjust trial, scourged, crowned with thorns, forced to carry the cross, brutally nailed to it and then hoisted up until it dropped with a thud into its hole so he could be mocked and gaped at some more, the agony, the hours of darkness, the cry of forsakenness. Don't ever think Jesus doesn't care or understand your suffering. When you look at circumstances and just cannot see his hand at work, you can remember that you see his heart on the cross.

He suffered terribly for us and

C. He suffered willingly.

In **verse 32**, you read where *Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.* ³³ *But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."* Jesus wanted all the disciples to hear this. He was willingly fulfilling God's plan! He would agonize over it all in the garden, but he was going to the cross because he chooses to go to the cross to fulfill the will of the Father, to defeat the devil, and to save his people for love's sake.

Illustration: Think of the person who has meant the most to you in life. Think of the greatest human beings you have ever known, read about or heard of. Put all those images of characteristics together then use your imagination to as far as you can to try to conceive of someone ever greater, the most perfect, powerful, embodiment of love, strength, goodness and truth imaginable. Then realize he is greater than that! His true greatness is humanly incomprehensible. In **Colossians 2:9-10** Paul says *in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you are complete in him.* **1 Peter 1:8** says *you were not redeemed with corruptible things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Jesus.* That says something about God's love, your value, his commitment to fulfill his good and equally incomprehensible promises.

He suffered vicariously, terribly, and willingly. Then, fourth,

F. He suffered triumphantly.

Verse 31 ends with Jesus saying he would suffer and be killed but then, after three days, rise again. Part of the greatness of the sacrifice of Jesus is that his sacrifice was demonstrated to be powerful to the salvation of our souls through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. His resurrection vindicated all he said and taught and did for us.

CONCLUSION

There are two things, which, if you know them, can give you the strength to face all of life's challenges and difficulties. The first is the reality of the love of God. Is there a God who actually loves us, who loves you? The second is the ultimate triumph of love and goodness. Is God going to bring good out of evil and faithfully fulfill all his good promises? If you know that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, then you know that God is a God who deeply loves you. And, if with that you know that His love will ultimately triumph over evil and His cause will be vindicated, then you have in those two truths a great treasure, two foundation stones on which you can build your life, a message that you can preach and to yourself, treasure in your heart and share with the world; God is love, and God's love will triumph over evil because of the greatness of Jesus and his sacrifice.

In the beautiful little book, *Gentle and Lowly*, the author asks this: *If compassion itself, the very heart and essence of compassion clothed itself in a human body and went walking around this earth, what would it look like?* Then he answers; we don't have to wonder. He is saying that is what we see in Jesus. And He is the same for you and me today. **Hebrews 13:8** says, "*Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever.*" The same Jesus who embraced the outcast, the misunderstood, and the sufferers and sinners and brought grace to them all in his own day reaches out to us today as our risen Savior. As great as he is, he befriends us and saves us. Look to him. Trust in him. Find hope and comfort in him. Love the way he loves. If need be, suffer with and for him strengthened by the assurance of his sympathies. Let the greatness of his sacrifice for change your heart and life.

Amen

Prayer of Confession

Almighty and merciful God, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. We have been far too indifferent to the incomparable greatness of Jesus and his sufferings for us. Forgive our sins, renew our hearts, grant us a humble kindness toward others that reflects your great love for us and our sincere love for our Savior. Restore us, Lord, according to your promises declared to the world in Christ Jesus, our Lord. We ask in his name, Amen

Assurance of Grace

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; Psalm 103:8-13

¹ I was greatly helped by Dick Lucas in this section. His sermon, "Who do you say that I am?" can be found here: <https://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/-b41c7d9d-8fcb-4f1e-b225-c1689364607b>