

Matthew 16:21-26

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From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"

Have you ever been to the circus and watched a lion tamer tame a lion? Maybe, at least, you've seen pictures of that sort of thing. It *seems* like an extremely risky act, but the lion tamer does carry some important tools to help him. He'll have a whip with him, that he cracks back and forth towards the lion. And then the lion tamer will always have a small chair with him, that he'll hold out in front of him towards the lion. And I always wondered what the point of that chair was. I kind of assumed it was just to keep the distance between the lion and the tamer, perhaps as a sort of shield, while the whip did all the real work in keeping the lion at bay. But in reality, the most important part of that act is, in fact, the chair that the lion tamer holds.

You see, when the lion tamer holds that chair out in front of him, the lion sees it as a threat, and it will try to keep its focus on each of those four legs on the bottom of the chair. Because of this, the lion becomes distracted, as its attention is split in four directions at once. The effect is that a type of paralysis settles over the lion. It's entranced, successfully tamed, simply by its split attention.

And I wonder if we have been paralyzed in a similar way. We can be like that lion; we have so many things in our lives to pay attention to that we lose focus. We get distracted by this event and that financial worry and these house guests that eventually we lose sight of the one thing important. And if you've noticed this going on in your life, I'd like to encourage you today to keep your attention focused on the goal, to stay concentrated on what is truly important. We can begin to do this as we bring our attention to Jesus' words this morning and as we consider the theme:

Focus on the Cross and You'll See:

- I. The necessity of Christ's
- II. The privilege of our own

Our text opens with a transition point in Jesus' ministry. Up to this point, He's been preaching and teaching and healing—and that will all continue!—but now He's beginning His march to the cross. That's where *His* focus is, and so He lets His disciples know exactly what will happen. He describes that ***"He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."*** And it says how it was *from that time on* that Jesus *began* to show them this, meaning this was His *constant* focus; the cross was *always* on His mind.

And it always astonishes me when I think about all this. Jesus knew *exactly* what would happen to Him. He knows who would betray Him, who would accuse Him, how He would die, where it would

happen. He knows all of it! How would you feel in that situation? Have you ever had those events in life that you *have* to go through but which you're also dreading? A surgery, a test, an uncomfortable meeting—whatever it is, we've been there before. You know it's coming, you don't want to go through with it, but you have to. And every day it gets closer, the dread builds and builds.

And now you think about Jesus who not only knows exactly what will happen at *this* point about a *year* in advance, but who even knew what the plan was from eternity! The Apostle Peter writes about this in his first epistle: ***"You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you."*** (1 Peter 1:18-20) He always knew of the cross and the pain at the end, but still willingly ***"emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."*** (Philippians 2:7) His focus was on the cross, knowing everything He would have to go through, but considering it nothing in comparison to His love for you. He knew that ***His cross was necessary***, so He bore it willingly.

But that whole idea of the Messiah suffering and dying, that was foreign to Peter's mind. He thought Jesus needed to be straightened out, so he rebukes Him: ***"Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."*** Of course, Peter doesn't really know what He's saying, or what it would mean if Jesus did *not* die on the cross. So, Jesus rebukes Peter in return! ***"Get behind Me Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."*** You know, Peter likely had good intentions by his rebuke of Jesus. Maybe he thinks Jesus is depressed about something, maybe he thinks Jesus is being defeatist, maybe he thinks Jesus just needs a little pep-talk: ***"This shall never happen to you!"*** And he says this because he's just like us. Suffering is uncomfortable. We think of suffering as a distinctly *bad* thing. Why would you ever suffer if you could avoid it?

In Jesus' response, ***"Get behind Me Satan,"*** we might be reminded of Satan's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Satan said, ***"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."*** (Matthew 4:3) There's certainly a bit of a "prove it" baked into that statement, as in, "If you're really God, prove it right now." But there's also something more. There's also this element of, "Why are you starving out here in the wilderness, if *You* are the Son of God?! You don't deserve this!" And isn't that almost always how we view our own suffering? "I don't deserve this! Why is this happening to me?" That's always the question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

If there was ever anyone who could have asked, "Why is this happening to me," and had a valid argument—it was Jesus. Only once in human history has something truly bad happened to someone who was *only* good. And He volunteered to go through it. Jesus was willing to suffer. He did not do so because He enjoyed it—just look at His anguish in the Garden and you can see it was no walk in the park. He volunteered for the suffering because it was necessary. It was necessary because we make it necessary. We've done so because our focus is always split in different directions.

Think of Peter. Jesus is speaking of spiritual truths of eternal victory, but Peter is thinking more about the physical nature of everything. He's *likely* thinking about how Jesus dying in Jerusalem would mean that he might have to suffer too! He's *likely* thinking as the disciples were *always* thinking—that there would be places of power and glory for them if Jesus established a new kingdom in Jerusalem, and

this suffering would short-circuit that whole idea! And we're the same way. Paul tells us, "**Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.**" (Colossians 3:2) But that's pretty hard for us. We've always got our minds going in many directions at once. Sure, maybe we set our minds on things that are above on Sunday mornings, at least for the parts of the service during which we're not distracted! But with the rest of our time, where are we really looking? Up or down? I know the answer for me. And because of that, Jesus ought to look at me and say, "**Get behind Me Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.**"

And this is why Jesus' cross was necessary. He knew He had to "**go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.**" He had to do it, because that was the only way that I could be forgiven, that I could be saved. That was the only way to break Satan's hold on us, so that instead of calling us Satan, Jesus could look at us and say, "**Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.**" (Matthew 25:34)

Thanks be to God that Jesus' focus was *always* on the cross. He kept His focus there because His heart was always set on you. So, let's keep our **Focus on the Cross** as well! With our focus there we're reminded of the necessity of Christ's cross, and we can rejoice in it. But there is another cross for us to be mindful of. It's one that we've all been given. "**Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.'**"

Now, I think we're all alike in this way—church is a pleasant escape for us. We've all got worries and sufferings from day-to-day, and here we have a wonderful opportunity to put that all aside and instead hear some comfort from God's Word. Well, it doesn't seem very comforting for Christ to not only remind us of our sufferings, but to actually tell us that we will suffer, that we will bear crosses. That's not what we want to hear! But what if I told you this cross is a privilege to bear? I'm not sure you're convinced by that, that's kind of like a child that doesn't want to eat his food, and his mom tells him to be grateful that he has food at all. I don't think that child is often convinced by that. But it is true—**Focus on the Cross and You'll See the privilege of our own.**

Why is it that we resent suffering in the first place? The answer might seem obvious, but I want to consider the less obvious answer. Isn't it because we think we're above it? Because we agree with the world that "bad things shouldn't happen to good people"? Think about when you see other people suffering, say on the news. You hear of someone dying, someone losing a loved one in some accident. And you probably feel sorry for them momentarily. And then you might follow that thought with, "I'm glad that didn't happen to me." And *then*, the next thought that we all sometimes naturally have is to start thinking of possible reasons why this happened to them! We start explaining, "Maybe they shouldn't have done *this* and then *that* wouldn't have happened."

Why do we do that? People are always doing that, including us. Why? I think the reason is because deep down we think that bad things shouldn't happen to good people. And we think that we are good people! So, if you can paint some tragedy as being deserved, then you can also convince yourself that it wouldn't happen to you, because you'd never put yourself in that situation. And that shows us, that our sinful minds are totally opposite of our Savior's. We want to avoid it at all costs, Jesus went

willingly. And He warns us about this desperation to avoid all suffering: ***“Whoever would save his life will lose it.”*** Let’s not be so quick to run away from suffering. Because, again, the crosses that we bear are privileges to bear. *How?*

It's really very simple. When you suffer bitter pain in your life, rather than keeping your focus on what you’re going through and thinking, “Why is this happening to me,” **Focus on the Cross.** Use the opportunity of the cross that *you’re* bearing to look at Christ’s cross. Be reminded of the suffering that He went through for you! Ask yourself, “Why did this happen to Him,” and *remember*, it was for you. Christ volunteered for His suffering, to spare you from eternal suffering. Look at ***“Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*** (Hebrews 12:2) You were the joy that He held onto throughout all the pain. He did this so that no amount of suffering—no cross no matter how hard to bear—could separate you from the love of God.

This is why Jesus said to His disciples: ***“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*** (John 16:33) Whatever pain you’re going through, you *already* know how it ends. It ends at your Savior’s side in heaven, because He has already overcome all things on your behalf. He’s overcome your sin, overcome pain, overcome death—which means that you have too. So this then is why our crosses are privileges to bear. Because if they cause us to **Focus on the Cross**, to focus on Christ and lean on Him, then suffering only serves to bring us closer to our eternal goal.

And there is another benefit too. When you think about Christ’s suffering, you know it was for you, but it wasn’t only for you. It was also for your neighbor. And we can see the privilege of our crosses when we consider what they can do for our *neighbors* also. We live in times full of lots of suffering. And these uncertain times are a perfect opportunity for Christians to suffer for Christ. Not to whine or complain or to moan about how it’s unfair, or how we don’t like it, or whatever. When there’s so much suffering, you can bring relief to people who are suffering by showing them Christ’s love. When there’s so much uncertainty, you can bring confidence to people by preaching Christ’s victory. When there is so much death, you can bring hope through the life that Christ alone gives.

We can only do this if we have a loose grip on this life. If we keep our focus here on this life and on what we want, then through any suffering we’re going to complain that it’s unfair and unwarranted. But as Jesus says, ***“What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”*** We could maintain a strong grip on the comforts of this life, and in so doing, lose sight of our Savior. Then, we’d be just like that lion, attention torn in too many directions and completely losing our focus. Dear friends in Christ, there’s no point in having a tight hold on this life. After all, life has already been *guaranteed* for you. In return for your soul, Christ gave Himself. Because of Him, it is true what the Apostle Paul says: ***“The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”*** (Romans 8:18) Thanks be to God! May He help us to *always* keep our **Focus on the Cross**. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.