

The Surprising Twist in Jesus' Messiah Journey

Matthew 16:21-28

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A surprise is something unexpected; unanticipated and well just plain surprising. Sometimes people are joyful over a surprise. Other times they are disappointed or even, upset at a surprise. How many of you like surprises? How many of you don't like surprises? Surprises are an inevitable reality in life. We don't know the future. We plan and prepare but unexpected events or developments come into every life. Then we must adjust to them to continue on in life. The same is true in our Christian walk. We may have come to Christ with certain expectations of God. We may have believed that coming to Christ would solve all our problems or be one unbroken chain of perpetual joy. But unexpected events come along and we must adjust.

Some of you might have had a surprise this last week or more recently that you are still adjusting to. The disciples were in for a big surprise. Jesus has just acknowledged that He was the Christ, the Promised One that their nation had looked forward to. Their expectations must have soared to think about what might happen next. But Jesus is about to give them a dose of surprising reality. The disciples would struggle in adjusting

to these. But we will see **"The surprising outcomes following Jesus' revelation as Christ require a radical reorientation of our lives."**

Today as we continue our journey through the Gospel of Matthew, we will see a couple of surprising outcomes following Jesus' Messianic announcement. Then we will see how we need to radically reorient our lives as Christ followers to adjust to these realities.

Matthew 16:21-28 (ESV) (Page 692)

²¹From 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. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." ²³But 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."

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For 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? ²⁷For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. ²⁸Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Matthew 16:21 marks a new direction in this Gospel. Matthew has spent chapters 14, 15 and 16 establishing the identity of Jesus. This

culminated last week in Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Then Matthew states "From that time on." From the moment that Jesus acknowledges to His disciples that He is the Christ, the Gospel shifts focus to Jesus' journey to the cross. But first, Jesus will explain the nature of this Messianic journey.

Now we must remember the almost fever pitch of messianic expectation that existed in those days. People cry out for deliverance when they experience oppression. The people experienced oppression from the occupying Roman, from the tax collecting soldiers of the local kings and from their religious leaders. We have seen how the Pharisees laid a heavy burden of expectations on the people through their oral interpretation of God's law. These disciples had grown up under this oppression.

Now they hear that the promised deliverer stood before them. They had adopted the common expectation of the Messiah. **What was the expectation of Messiah? Expectation 1 – Jesus will powerfully deliver Israel from her enemies and establish His reign in Jerusalem.** A messiah was supposed to deliver or save His people from those who oppressed them. So if Jesus was going to deliver the disciples and their people from their oppressors, he would have to overthrow the Romans, the local kings and the religious leadership. That was no small feat. It would be like

someone today in Russia toppling Putin from power along with all the local authorities. But they have seen Jesus display great power over disease, demons and nature. Surely, He will use it to now establish His kingdom.

But Jesus has a big surprise in store for them. **What was the surprise 1? Surprise #1 – Jesus would accomplish deliverance by going to Jerusalem, suffering under the Elders, Chief Priests and Scribes, being killed and rising on the third day.** Instead of going to Jerusalem as a conquering triumphant king, Jesus would go to Jerusalem to suffer at the hands of the current religious and political establishment. And he wouldn't only suffer, he would be killed. Yet there is hope. On the third day, He would be raised.

The Elders, Chief Priests and Scribes combines 3 major groups in Jerusalem. Some argue they represent the Sanhedrin, Israel's highest court at the time. Elders could refer to a person whose age, experience and character resulted in a position of leadership within the Pharisees and Sadducees. The chief priests were part of a ruling elite of prominent Jewish families. Four families have been identified historically. They alternated in supplying the offices of Chief Priest, Captain of the temple guard and treasurer of the temple. The teachers of the law or scribes were

professional interpreters of the law. We've seen some of them accompany Pharisees on missions to investigate Jesus.

Jesus predicts all these officials will inflict a suffering upon Him that will ultimately result in His execution. He will be killed and on the third day raised. So Jesus' journey to the cross was not some accident of history. Jesus would not be surprised by this. His campaign for Messiah did not fail. The cross was central to Jesus' mission. The Gospel message is incomplete without it. This surprising announcement begins His intentional journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Yes, the earthly oppressors would eventually be dealt with. But Jesus' going to the cross would bring deliverance from the far greater enemies of sin, death and the devil.

Now I don't know if we can really capture how much of a shock this must have been to the disciples. It would be like having 100,000 dollars in the bank one day and then finding out it's all gone the next day. Or it might be similar to expecting that you will have 30 more years with a family member and then receive news that they have less than 3 months to live. But in this situation, Jesus didn't have a terminal illness. Jesus could just avoid going to Jerusalem. Or Jesus could overpower those who wanted to harm him.

The surprise is too great for Peter to remain silent. He has to speak up. But he won't do it in front of the other disciples for that would be disrespectful. A student does not correct their teacher publicly. In fact, in that teaching environment, you never corrected your teacher. You could ask questions. But Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him. "Far be it from you Lord! This shall never happen to you." Now I believe that Peter had good intentions and was completely sincere in this approach. He stands up for His Lord and friend. He naturally doesn't want His friend to experience harm and suffering. Peter cannot understand how such a disaster could be part of God's purpose.

But Peter was dead wrong. He was more concerned about Jesus' comfort and perhaps his own position in the coming kingdom than God's calling upon Jesus' life. In Peter's zeal, he becomes an unwitting agent for Satan. Rewind 12 chapters to Matthew 4. Satan comes to tempt Jesus. The third temptation consists of showing Jesus the kingdoms of the world. They could all be his if only he would bow down to Satan and worship him. In other words, bypass the cross and you can still be king. Fast forward back to Matthew 16:22-23. "Far be it from you Lord. This "going to the cross" shall never happen to you." Satan couldn't have said it better himself. How convenient that it came through the leader of the disciples.

Yet Jesus demonstrates that absolutely nothing will deter Him from this mission. He recognizes the ultimate source behind Peter's rebuke. So he pronounces "Get behind me Satan. You are a hindrance, literally a stumbling block to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God but on the things of men." Talk about a dramatic turnaround in 5 verses. Last week in verse 18, Jesus declare "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the Gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Now in verse 23, Peter the rock gets rebuked as a stumbling rock for Jesus. He had in mind the ways of man over the ways of God. Peter concluded he knew the only way for Jesus to become Messiah – through power and conquering.

So Peter and the disciples and you and I have to radically reorient our lives to this new reality. **What radical reorientation is required?**

Radical Reorientation – We must set our minds on the ways of God instead of the ways of man. This does not happen in 3 easy steps over 5 minutes. Romans 12:2 tells us that we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Then we will be able to test and discern God's will and God's ways. But it takes time and openness to God and His Word. We are saturated in man's way of doing things. We need to filter our

decisions, directions, thoughts and words through God and His Word. One classic scripture on this is Philippians 4:8. "Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable; if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about such things." So how much encouragement and reinforcement do we get in our world to think about that which is true; honorable; just; pure; lovely; commendable; excellent and worthy of praise in God's eyes? Do you see how radically reoriented our minds need to be to focus on the ways of God rather than the ways of man? Jesus would work with the disciples over the remaining months of His life to prepare them for radical reorientation that would come following His death, resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

But the surprises didn't end with Jesus' announcement that He would suffer, be killed and rise again. **What was expectation 2? Jesus' followers will hold places of privilege, power and comfort in Jesus' new kingdom.** The disciples constantly jostled for position under Jesus. They would argue about who was the greatest. James and John's mother asked Jesus to give them the positions of greatest honor in His kingdom. Even at the last supper, they continued the argument.

What was the reality? Followers of Jesus will not enjoy a life of privilege, status and power under Jesus' kingdom. **Instead, Christ's followers must embrace a life of self-denial, cross-bearing and following.** Jesus declares this in verse 24. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." This is the call to discipleship which is the mission of the church. This is why we exist – to grow as disciples of Christ and make other disciples of Christ. Discipleship is a committed and progressive following of Jesus Christ as Master.

Jesus says we must deny ourselves. Now we can interpret that to mean that the Christian life is basically one denying yourself of any joy, fun or pleasure. There is no joy or fun. It's all self-denial and living the life of drudgery. But that's not what's involved in self-denial. Jesus calls us to deny our self that wants to go against Him and do things our own way. He has much better in store for us if we go this way. Certainly the Christian life is hard. Self-denial, carrying crosses and following someone else is pretty tough in a world that keeps preaching "it's all about you."

But this is the path Jesus calls us to for His glory and our ultimate good. He shows us why this is the best path in the following verse 25. "For whoever would save his life – clutch his life to him or herself – forego risking anything for Christ – will lose it. But whoever loses his life or gives up

lordship of his or her life to Christ, will find it. We will discover a life where we actually begin to think about and participate in that which is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and worthy of God's praise.

"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world yet loses his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?" The most priceless part about any human being is their soul. Our souls can be lost for eternity if we don't bring them under Christ's reign. We can gain all there is to gain in this world yet lose our soul at the coming of Christ. That doesn't mean we stop having a soul. I agree with those who interpret this to mean our soul will fail to find its eternal home. It will be lost because of our resistance towards Christ. Jesus talks about the reality of Judgment Day and the accounting of our lives before Christ. Those who have saved or kept their lives apart from Christ will end up losing their lives with Christ through eternity. But those who have lost or given up lordship of their lives to Christ will find their lives and wholeness in Christ.

For the disciples, this meant they would not have positions of power, prestige and comfort in an earthly kingdom. They would walk the journey of self-denial, taking up their crosses and following where Jesus led them. Some of them would take up a literal cross. Others had to bear

imprisonment and separation from family because of following Christ. But they would be ready for that day Jesus talks about in verse 27. On that day Jesus would come in power. Then He would overthrow the earthly oppressors while bringing in His now visible Kingdom. But Jesus will not leave them without encouragement to keep going. In verse 28, He says: Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in the kingdom. What might Jesus be referring to here?

He did not return for the final judgment during the disciple's life time. But there would be some glimpse of Jesus' powerful coming kingdom that would sustain the disciples. There are many possibilities. Jesus could be referring to the transfiguration which immediately follows this passage. Peter, James and John would witness this. Or He could be referring to the resurrection which 11 out of the 12 disciples would witness. Or he could be referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit or the spread of the kingdom through the preaching of the early church. Whatever Jesus meant, this would bring encouragement to those who witnessed it to keep going on the life of self-denial, cross-bearing and following until their time was done. But until Jesus' return, our lives need this radical reorientation Jesus talks about.

So what sort of radical reorientation is required for us to adjust to this second surprising reality? **Ask the Holy Spirit for power to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus.** We will not gain positions of power, prestige and comfort in this world because of following Christ. If anything, we might lose power, prestige and comfort because of following Christ. But we can still live lives of joy amidst the hardships of following Christ. The key is to discover that our greatest satisfaction is found in Him. If the Christian life is nothing but self-denial for the sake of self-denial, then it's still self-centered. But if it's Christ centered and we discover the great joy and hope found in Christ, then we begin to discover that denying ourselves is actually good for us.

I think about my life – I was prepared to “settle” for a job to get some money so I could live for evenings, weekends and vacations. It would have involved living for myself and never risking anything for Christ. But God closed the doors on me and moved me to where He wanted me. Through that stretching, I continue to find the life He has for me despite the pain, suffering and messes I go through. God calls us to move spiritually to where He wants us to be.

Where might Jesus be calling you to deny yourself and obey Him? Maybe He wants you to speak up for someone who is a victim of injustice.

Or bring forward an unethical business practice. Maybe He wants you to step back from pressuring others to change and begin to change yourself. Maybe He's calling you to set in place clear boundaries to someone who pressures you to sin. Or maybe He's calling you to deny yourself by stepping up and making that change in your lifestyle. Maybe He calls you to throw away that destructive game or book or movie or device that brings all that junk into your mind; throw out those occult symbols; end subscription to that questionable TV package; stop watching that show; or to shut down that account or app; move out; break up; settle down or fully commit; forgive; ask forgiveness; confess.

Some of you here are already going through hard times. The thought of denying yourself and carrying any more just crushes you. But we need to be aware that hard times can squeeze lots of self-oriented stuff that's not pretty. What does self like to do when we suffer? We can wallow in self-pity; self-condemnation; self-righteousness; self-absorption; Panic; Despair; No joy.

We must turn to the Holy Spirit and meditate on the promises of God to deny ourselves when we suffer. Well if you're self-condemning focus on Romans 8:1 – There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. If you're prone to panic – Ask God to speak to your heart

about the reality that He is on the throne of the universe - Psalm 11:3-4 – If the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do? The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord's throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man.

If you're prone to self pity or despair, Actively move from great anguish of soul to confidence in God and His love – Psalm 31:1-8. Or if your self says God doesn't love you Meditate on the immeasurable pieces of God's love. Psalm 36:5-12. Pray restore to me the joy of my salvation. Meditate on the fact that you bring God delight which does not depend on your performance but is unvarying because you are in Christ like in Psalm 147:11 – The Lord delights in those who fear him; in those who hope in his unfailing love.

When life gets hard and we're drained emotionally, physically and spiritually our sinful-self cries out for satisfaction. It is here that we must keep focused on Christ and His promises.

We started today talking about surprises. Jesus describes a surprising direction for His life and a surprising reality for His followers. But it's not a surprise to us now. If we turn to Him, He will empower us to a radical reorientation of our lives that finds deep satisfaction and strength in Him no matter what surprises come our way. Will you join me now in asking Jesus for His strength to help us?