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### **Matthew 16:21 - 17:13**

#### **Jesus's Cross, Costly Call, and Glory**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian, pastor, and seminary professor in Nazi-controlled Germany, in the early decades of the 1900s. He was a prominent member of the confessing church - a coalition of evangelical churches that decided to firmly stand their ground in allegiance to Christ when the Nazi party demanded control over the churches of Germany. And like many of the other church leaders that strived to be faithful to the gospel in the face of Nazi persecution at that time, he suffered for it: many churches and seminaries had to go “underground” and meet in private; Bonhoeffer himself was imprisoned, even sentenced to a concentration camp, and was eventually executed there in 1945, shortly before the end of World War II.

Bonhoeffer was a man that knew well what it meant to suffer on account of allegiance to Jesus Christ. What inspires someone to follow Christ, even when it comes at an incredible cost - at the cost of losing everything, even our life? Bonhoeffer himself gave this answer in the classic book he wrote, *The Cost of Discipleship*. In that book, he makes it very clear that *every single Christian* is called to discipleship - and true discipleship is always costly, in one way or another. In one place, he wrote:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death - we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him to die.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Bonhoeffer told us, years before his own persecution and execution, that what *prepares us* for such suffering is firmly knowing that the call of Christian discipleship itself is a call to *die to ourselves* and live for Christ alone. Following Christ will inevitably involve denying ourselves, picking up our cross, and willingly joining Christ in suffering - all because we have our eyes of faith set on the hope of glory that will surely come for those in Christ Jesus!

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, translated by R. H. Fuller (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89.

The call to believe in Jesus and become a Christian is a call to *cross-shaped discipleship* - and that involves denial of self, enduring suffering, and death to self.

*What would drive us to live such radical, self-denying, counter-intuitive lives? A vision of life that has been transformed by the cross and glory of Christ.* This is what Jesus calls us to in our passage today, Matthew 16:21-17:13. First, we see the absolute necessity of the cross - that there is no gospel, no salvation, or no coming Kingdom *apart from* Jesus's life, suffering, death, and resurrection; it is by his sacrificial death for our sins that Jesus brings about His Kingdom and secures our salvation; we have no hope for salvation apart from clinging to His cross in faith. But next, this passage reminds us that the *response of faith* that the gospel demands is a life of *cross-shaped discipleship*: we see the necessity for us to *follow Christ by picking up our cross with him and dying to ourselves, our sin, and this world* in order to *live with Him in His eternal kingdom*. We're called to *costly discipleship*. But this passage does not leave us there; just when we might start to ask, "Is it really worth it?" we're motivated to press on confidently by seeing a *glimpse* of the glory of God revealed in our Savior, Jesus Christ. We're reminded here that the one who willingly suffered and died for us is none other than the all-glorious God Himself! And the path to life and glory for us will likewise only be found by going through suffering and death, with Christ, in order that we may be raised and live with Him.

So first, let's look at:

### **I. The Cross of Christ (16:21-23)**

As we saw last week, the disciples have just confessed faith in Jesus as the true *Messiah* - God's promised King who would come to save and deliver God's people. These are the seeds of faith in the gospel message of Jesus Christ, upon which Christ would build his church! And yet, this next passage shows us that the disciples did not yet fully understand exactly what it meant that Jesus was the Messiah; they did not yet understand the heart of the gospel - that Jesus, the true King, is also the promised *suffering servant*; that Jesus, our only Savior, would save us from our *sins* through his own *suffering and death in our place*.

Jesus has hinted at this all through the gospel, but now he speaks to it directly and explicitly: "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" (16:21). We're very familiar with this fact today; however, this was *not* what the

Jews expected from their Messiah during Jesus's lifetime; even among his core disciples, such news came as a terrible *shock*. They expected the Messiah to come in incredible power, authority and conquest! They most certainly did *not* expect the Messiah to *suffer and die* at the hands of Jewish and Roman authorities - this sounded like weakness, not power; *failure*, not victory. And this is why Peter, once again the spokesman of the Twelve, responds by actually *rebuking* the man he just professed as the Messiah: "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." Peter's rebuke of Jesus shows that he is thinking in terms *contrary to the Kingdom and purposes of God*; thinking not only in *earthly/human* terms, but in *Satanic* terms. Jesus turns on him with a scathing rebuke of his own: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hinderance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." He speaks now under the bidding of Satan, not God, for when he rebukes and tries to stop Jesus from willingly going to the Cross to fulfill his mission, he is a *stumbling block*; just like Satan, who tempted Jesus to abandon his mission in the wilderness, so Peter is a *hindrance* as he tries to stop Jesus from willingly going to his death in Jerusalem.

Yet Jesus will not swerve; he is determined to fulfill his mission. Jesus *must* "suffer, die, and be raised," because this was the only way to fulfill the promises of God in the scriptures; this was the only way to satisfy the just wrath of God against our sin - by Jesus, the God-Man, who was perfectly blameless, to freely offer himself up as a *sacrifice* in our place; on the cross, Jesus took *our sin and guilt* upon himself and bore *the full wrath of God against our sins* - the very thing our physical death is a picture of! But this was by *no means* a picture of weakness and failure; it was the plan of God all along. And Christ's victory was revealed when he was raised by God the Father on the third day, showing that His sacrifice for our sins was accepted, His victory won, and His Kingdom begun.

This is what Jesus means a few verses later, in verse 28: "Truly, 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." We know that Jesus has not yet returned to establish His kingdom in full, and yet he declared that some of the Twelve Disciples would see him "coming in his kingdom" before they died. What do we make of v.28, then? He means that the disciples witness the coming of the kingdom before they died because Jesus inaugurated His kingdom through the cross, his resurrection, and His ascension. When Christ died and He rose again, He rose as the victorious King. When He ascended into heaven, He was also being exalted to His glorious throne.

Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah and King - not just of Israel, but of all people, over all Creation! And he brought about His Kingdom *through the cross*. ***No cross - no crown; no suffering - no salvation for sinners.***

There is no salvation apart from Jesus's suffering, death, and resurrection. He offered himself as a *sacrifice* in the place of our sins. The resurrection shows that Jesus *vindicated* Him, and declares that He will justify and raise all who trust in Christ. This is the heart of the gospel. There is no hope for salvation for *anyone* outside of the cross of Christ. There is no hope for *anyone* to be saved outside of trusting in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone. Any attempt to undermine the necessity or centrality of the cross of Christ is Satanic. Any attempt to find another possible hope for salvation *apart from* explicit faith in Jesus Christ is Satanic. Yet, like the Jews in Jesus's day, there are many in our day who find the cross of Christ equally offensive (though for very different reasons). There are many people today, even many who claim to be Christians, who seek to undermine and side-step the cross all-together.

There are many who claim to be Christians yet deny the necessity of the Cross because they deny the wrath of God against sin; they say that Jesus didn't die to take away our sins as a sacrifice at all. Others claim to believe the gospel, yet also want to say that there is hope for salvation for some people *outside of believing in Christ*. I've known some people who believe Jews today will be saved even though they reject Jesus as the true Messiah. Many others, even in churches like ours, believe that those who die without ever hearing the gospel in their lifetime still have hope to be saved.

Yet all of these options *strip away the centrality and necessity of the cross*. There is absolutely *no hope for salvation* for anyone outside of Christ. The cross of Christ alone is sufficient to save us from our sins. As we just sang a few moments ago: "*What can wash away our sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*" Like Peter and his contemporary Jews, people in our day also face the temptation to minimize the centrality of the cross, or side-step it all-together. We're all guilty and without excuse because of our sins. Yet praise be to God! Jesus Christ lived, died, and was raised as a sacrificial substitute so that *anyone whole believes in Him* will be saved! The cross is our only hope - let us cling to it with relentless faith. The necessity of the

cross is at the center of the gospel we preach and believe in; therefore, it should also be at the center of our church, our every sermon, our songs, our prayers, and our lives!

[Transition] In fact, the call to believe in Christ and follow Him is to live a *cross-shaped life* like Him...

## II. The Cost of Following Christ (16:24-28)

After proclaiming the necessity of the Cross, Jesus now proclaims the necessity for us to *pick up our own cross, deny ourselves, and follow Him*. The only path to life runs through death to self. Jesus gives us this call in v.24: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” The call to *follow* Christ is a call to continual, lifelong discipleship. To become a Christian is to *follow Christ as his disciple*. But here’s what that call requires: *denying ourselves* and *picking up our own cross* alongside Christ. To carry one’s cross was a death march; it would be like a prisoner on death row being required to carry his own electric chair.

The call here is clear: Christ offers us *eternal life* by his free grace! But we must *die to ourselves* in the process. We must deny our sin and selfish desires; we must give up our self-centered ambitions; we must no longer live for ourselves or this world, but for Christ alone! We must turn away from our idols; we must take ourselves *off* the throne of our lives and submit to Jesus and King and Lord over us. We must turn *away* from sin in every way -we must be *dead* to it. And this requires being *dead* to ourselves - for the root of our sin is our *selfishness and pride, our love for ourselves, our pursuit of sinful ambitions and desires*. This is the natural state of humanity we’re all born into - slavery to sin. But the call to follow Christ is a call to be *dead* to sin, dead to the wicked ways of the world and all that it has to offer - and to be raised to a new life even now - a life in Christ!

And this means that CHristian discipleship is *incredibly costly*. The offer of the gospel is completely free - we’re saved by grace alone! And yet, such grace is *never alone*. The free gift of Christ will cost you your entire life; for Christ demands all of who we are. This means we can’t go on deliberately sinning. This means my life goal can no longer be my own personal pleasure and comfort, my personal gain, my own selfish ambition, gain, desires, and pride. THis means I

have to give up *everything!* I have to follow and obey Christ *no matter what it costs* - even when it involves self-denial, sacrifice, and suffering, even to the point of death.

So what does costly discipleship demand of you today? Following Christ for you will not always be easy; it's going to cost you. Christ demands you hold nothing back for yourself; he demands you deny yourself. Even if it means giving up that secret sin; that secret pleasure; if it means letting go of that selfish ambition or desire; even if it means you will *suffer* to do so.

Why would anyone pursue such costly discipleship? Why would we willingly *die to ourselves? Because it is the **only** path to true life!* Our options are clear: "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?" (vv.25-26) We can either *die to ourselves and lose out on what this sinful world has to offer*, and thus *gain* our souls, gaining eternal life with Christ, **or** we can live this life to the fullest, gain even "the whole world," and yet *lose our souls* - a haunting reminder of the judgment of God, before whom we must all give an account. The choice should be clear. Nothing can replace the value of our soul - the value of eternal life! The reward greatly outweighs the cost; *eternal life* is of far greater value than anything life in this world has to offer!

Even though the cost of discipleship is high - dying to ourselves *now* - the value of what we gain is *infinitely more valuable: our souls! Eternal life! A right standing before the Lord as those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ!* What price can be prepared with such a reward? When we put it in eternal perspective, the choice should be simple: we must *die to ourselves now*, being united to Christ in His death, dying to ourselves, our sin, and this world, so that we will *live forever with Christ in His perfect, unending Kingdom!*

Brothers and sisters, let us follow Christ, no matter the cost.

[Transition] And the motivation we need to do so comes as we firmly fix our eyes on the glory of Christ.

### III. The Glory of Christ (17:1-13)

In chapter 17:1-13, Jesus brings three of his disciples - Peter, James, and John, the "inner circle" - up onto a mountain with him: and while there, they encounter an incredible vision of the glory of Christ. And this passage is meant to give us a glimpse of His glory, as well - a foretaste of the glory that will be revealed when Christ comes again.

On the mountain, Jesus was “transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (17:2). In one sense, this resembles the scene from *Exodus 34:29-30* where GOD reveals his glory to Moses on the mountain, so that Moses face radiated a reflection of that glory. But Jesus doesn’t take the place of Moses in that story - he takes the place of God; the disciples, like Moses before them, are witnessing the glory of God - and it is being revealed *in Christ*. Jesus’s whole body, his face, even his clothes are *transformed* into a heavenly, divine appearance, because *His glory, the very glory of God, was being revealed*.

Next, His glory is revealed in another way: *Moses and Elijah*, two prominent figures from the Old Testament, who lived hundreds of years earlier, suddenly *appeared* before them. Both represent the *Law and the Prophets* - representation of GOD’s works and promises of redemption unfolded throughout the Old Testament through the prophets of old. Both represent the *Law and the Prophets* - representation of GOD’s works and promises of redemption unfolded throughout the Old Testament through the prophets of old.

**Moses** was the great Prophet who met with God on Mount Sinai, delivered God’s people from Egypt and through the wilderness, and brought down God’s Law and Covenant for Israel, GOD’s people. The end of Deuteronomy, the last of the Torah, the Law books, that Moses wrote, ends with a prophetic promise that a “prophet greater than Moses” would one day arise to lead and deliver God’s people once more (Deut. 18:15-19; cf. Deut. 34:10-12).

**Elijah** was one of the great prophets that arose in the later days of the Kingdom of Israel. ELijah also met with God on a mountain top (Mount Horeb). He proclaimed God’s word to the people, calling them to remember and hold faithfully to God’s covenant and Law, even witness by miraculous signs, just as it was with Moses. And very notably, Elijah did not physically die, but was taken up to heaven directly.

The reason these two men of old appear and speak to Jesus here, in front of Peter, James, and John, is to *emphasize Jesus’s glory*. As prominent as these men were in the Bible’s history, and as glorious as their ministries were, they *pale in comparison* to the *much greater glory of Jesus Christ*. This is because *their entire ministries* were meant to *point towards* the coming of Jesus Christ. This point is made explicitly clear at the end (vv.9-13): Elijah himself pointed towards another prophet, the “forerunner” - John the Baptist - to come before and prepare the way for Jesus, underscoring that Elijah, the other prophets, and even John the Baptist were all meant to *declare the glory of Jesus!*

Jesus fulfills the entirety of the Law and the Prophets - the Word of God revealed throughout the unfolding narrative of redemption in the Old Testament. Jesus is the prophet greater than Moses, who brings in a *New and better covenant*; he ushers in a *greater sacrifice* - himself, offering His blood for the sins of the whole world, for whoever believes in Him; He is the true, greater High Priest, entering into the true holy of holies, in Heaven, not just the tent of meeting or tabernacle; He is the true Law giver as He embodies the perfect Law in His perfect, blameless righteousness; He gives the Law of Christ and writes it on our hearts. His glory is the very glory of God!

Peter responds, in verse 4, by blurting out, “Lord it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” This shows he recognizes the *greatness*, the glory, of what they are witnessing, but he still doesn’t quite get it, as the following rebuke shows: he thinks Jesus is being *elevated* to the same level of Moses and Elijah; but what’s really going on is that *Jesus’s glory far outstrips the level of significance of Moses and Elijah*. God himself affirms the height of Jesus’s glory in the next verse.

First, in verse 5, we see a “bright cloud overshadowed them” on the mountain. This “cloud” represents God’s presence - just like how God’s cloud was with the Israelites in the Exodus events, leading them through the sea and the wilderness. This also echoes the cloud of glory and presence in God’s tabernacle and temple.

And then, God *speaks* out of the cloud: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” God is declaring that Jesus is His beloved Son. This is the very same declaration God made from heaven at Jesus’s baptism; as it’s repeated here, He is making clear that Jesus’s glory is far above that of any prophet or man that has ever come before Him

As Jesus’s divine glory is revealed, the disciples “fell on their faces and were terrified.” Yet Jesus tells them to rise and “have no fear.” And as they do, “they saw no one but Jesus only.” And those words are pregnant with significance. *The whole point of this passage, the whole point of the Bible and every prophet and promise that has come before* - all of it points us to *Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory!*

Jesus’s glory outstrips them all because *He is the very Son of God - God Himself!* Jesus is far greater than Moses or Elijah, for He is God Himself who took on flesh - the God-Man! God is declaring here that the Son of Man is none other than the eternal Son of God; Jesus is the

God-Man, the visible image of the fullness of the glory of God (“For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” - Col. 1:19).

### **Application**

And the incredible part of it all is: *this same Lord of glory* is the very same *suffering servant* who willingly went to the cross; who willingly gave himself up as a sacrifice, to suffer and die in *our place*; to save us from our own *sin, guilt, shame, and death!* The one who died and was raised is the very Lord of glory - and just as we’ve glimpsed here in this passage today, one day *all of creation* will witness the glory of Christ revealed! And this same crucified, risen Lord of glory bids us to come and die with him - so that we may live with him, in eternal glory, forever!

Brother and sisters, let us fix our eyes firmly on the glory revealed in Christ Jesus. When we look *behind* to the cross and *ahead* to the coming glory to be revealed, and realize that *we* will receive the benefits of Jesus’s glorious grace being displayed, it motivates us to press on, no matter the cost, knowing that it will all be worth it. For we will only be motivated to live out cross-shaped discipleship when our hearts have been captured by the glory of Christ.

Set your eyes on the glorious grace and eternal life to be revealed in the day of Christ! And remember that the only road to the life to come is dying to ourselves *now*, day to day.

If you’re not a believer this morning, I invite you to join us as we join Christ in death to your own self and sins - in order that we may live forever with Him! If you have any questions about this gospel - about how to become a Christian and be saved, or about baptism or church membership, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.