

How to Save Your Life

Mark 8:27–38

Turn or Mark 8. We will read the most important verses in Mark. They are the key to understanding the whole Gospel. The sermon title is “how to save your life.”

1 Peter Confesses that Jesus is the Christ - Mark 8:27–38

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

This is the turning point of the Gospel of Mark. Until now Jesus has never talked about who he is, he has never taught about himself, he has never asked anyone who they thought he was.

In the very first sentence of Mark, we were told that this was the good news of Jesus Christ. So we the readers have known from the very start. But "Christ" has not been mentioned even once, by anyone, since then.

Peter is splendid here. Others debate about Jesus, some say this, some say that. But Peter doesn't say, "We think you're the Christ," or, "We say you're the Christ." Peter speaks for them all and says, "You are the Christ!"

Because they trust Jesus, even in their failing way, the disciples have been given more of the mystery of the kingdom. Now, almost exactly at the middle of Mark's Gospel, the disciples can see what readers were told in the very first line: Jesus is the Christ.

Jesus responds bluntly: "Tell no one." That means Peter was right. But for some reason people are not ready to hear about this.

2 Jesus Predicts: Suffering, Rejection, Death, Resurrection - Mark 8:31–32a

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

These verses tell us why Jesus didn't want people to hear about him being the Christ. For Jesus, being the Christ meant suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. No one else, including the disciples, were thinking about that kind of Christ.

Verse 31 says, "*He began to teach them.*" That is, Jesus didn't just say this once. This became the theme of Jesus' teaching. It comes up again and again. Jesus switched his teaching emphasis to this. Verse 32 says "*he spoke plainly.*" Jesus did not say these things cautiously or carefully. He was blunt, clear, and direct.

As soon as disciples knew that Jesus was the Christ, Jesus changed his teaching. He no longer taught them about the kingdom; he now taught them that he, the Christ, had to suffer and die and rise. Jesus was waiting for this signal to start this teaching about himself, waiting for his disciples to conclude that he was the Christ.

This change continues for the rest of Mark. In Mark chapters 8–10 Jesus teaches several times about his death and resurrection. In Mark 11 Jesus enters Jerusalem, just a few days from Passover and his death. From here on, Jesus' death is the center of Mark.

3 Peter Scolds Jesus, Jesus Scolds Peter – Mark 8:32b–33

Jesus spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Peter already had definite ideas about what the Christ would do, and how the Christ would act. What Jesus was saying did *not* fit Peter's definite ideas! In several Old Testament prophecies, the Messiah would be David's descendant, and would sit on David's throne. David did a remarkable job of defeating all of Israel's enemies. In Jesus' day, Israel had powerful enemies. The Christ would do what David did. But he wouldn't.

Was Jesus talking to Peter or to Satan? Just to Peter. "Satan" means "adversary." Jesus called Peter his adversary, which he was at that moment. Satan himself wanted Jesus to die. Satan led Judas to betray Jesus (Luke 22:3; John 13:2, 27). At this stage, Satan does not understand God's plan any better than the disciples. Jesus is just talking to Peter.

Jesus said to Peter, you're thinking about the human way to bring the kingdom, not God's way. What is God's way to kingdom power, kingdom life?

4 The Way of the Cross – Mark 8:34

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to follow after me must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Jesus called the crowd to him. Jesus had other followers than the Twelve. What's important here for us is that "carry our cross" is not just for the apostles. Jesus said to whoever was there. "**Whoever** wants to follow me." *Whoever*. This is a baptismal sermon, make no mistake. If we want Jesus, we need to listen.

Twice here Jesus speaks about "following" him. The NIV does not include them both, but in Greek it's there twice. "*Whoever wants to follow after me must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" Jesus made discipleship imitating his own death and resurrection.

In verse 31 Jesus said he must suffer, be rejected, die, and rise. Now, in verse 34, he says if anyone wants to follow after him, they shall do the same and follow him. Jesus would endure suffering, rejection, death, and then rise. We follow him. Jesus' death and resurrection are his example for us to follow.

In Roman custom, when someone was condemned to be crucified, they had to carry their cross piece, something like a fence post, from the courthouse to the place of execution. When you got there, they would nail you to it and hoist you up on the upright pole that was already fixed in the ground.

A cross is not a burden you have to carry, it is the way you will die. They had all seen someone carrying their cross. No one ever said, "what a burden, that thing must weigh 50 pounds." Within an hour, the person would be nailed there and dying. It is how a person will be executed. It is like carrying the gun that they will use to shoot you. Like carrying the sword they will use to behead you.

Jesus could not have used a more distressing picture of what it was like to follow him. Enough early believers were crucified because they would not deny Christ. Mark was written in Rome. Around that time, the Roman emperor Nero crucified many Christians. When Mark wrote this, "take up your cross" was not a metaphor, or a symbol. It was that kind of execution.

Sometimes, when I am feeling sorry for myself, the Lord says to me, "So, Ed, would you rather be crucified?" "No, Lord" I say, "this is not that bad." That ends the conversation.

If we have a painful trouble that will not go away, a better biblical image is Paul's tormenting thorn in the flesh, which he describes in 2 Corinthians 12. There are many such thorns in this church. Carrying our cross means getting ready to die for Jesus. Let's not try to tame it.

5 How to Keep Your Life – Mark 8:35–38

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. For what good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? For what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For if anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Jesus assumes that everyone wants life, everyone wants to keep life. He's right. But Jesus has upside down instructions about how to keep life. The way to keep life, says Jesus, is to make me and my gospel more important than living, than keeping life.

How to keep your life? How to save your life? Answer: prepare to die for Jesus and his words. If we want to follow him, we must be prepared to die for him. Jesus could not be clearer about that. Then Jesus gives us four reasons to convince us that following Jesus to our own execution is the only sensible choice. In Greek, each line begins with the word “for,” which means he’s giving us a reason, he’s explaining.

Reason 1: *For, whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.*

One way to keep life is to hang on to it, to collect whatever would make life last longer, do whatever makes us feel safe or feel alive. Jesus says that way doesn't work.

The other way to keep life is to make Jesus and his gospel more important than keeping life. And Jesus says that way will work! Do you trust Jesus? I don't mean: do you believe in him. I mean: do you trust what he says? Would he lie to you, or would he only tell you the truth? Do you trust Jesus? [wait a bit]

Jesus is telling us here that there is a human way to keep life, and there is God's way to keep life. God's way for him, for Jesus, is: suffering, rejection, death, and then *life!*

God's way for us is the same. We *follow* Jesus. He made obeying God his Father more important than keeping his life, and after resurrection he ended up *alive*; and he tells us that by making him and his gospel more important than keeping life, we also will end up *alive!*

Jesus never says we *should* deny ourselves and take up our cross. He never says it is better, or more spiritual, or godlier, or only for those who are passionate about Jesus.

He said the *only* way to end up alive is to prepare for this. He said it is the only way to keep life. Everyone wants life and to keep it. Do we trust what Jesus said about life, and keeping life?

Reason 2: *For, what good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?*

Jesus separates the life of our bodies from our souls. He puts ultimate value on our souls, and expects us to do the same. He asks us, what if you get absolutely everything you want in the world, in this life, but lose your soul? Have you come out ahead?

We've probably never asked ourselves that question, but Jesus wants us to ask it. If you got all you want in the world, but lose your soul, have you come out ahead? The obvious answer is “no,” but he does not answer it, because you and I need to answer it for ourselves. What good is it, says Jesus, to gain the whole world and lose your soul?
[pause]

Reason 3 *For, what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?*

Suppose you gain the whole world, and it cost you your soul. You lost your soul in the process. Even if you gained the whole world, will you have enough to buy your soul back? “God, I’ll give you whatever you want to buy my soul back. Name your price, God.” Jesus asks, do you think that will work? No, it won’t; but Jesus does not answer. We have to answer that. We must say, “no, that won’t work.”

So we are back to reason 1: *for whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.*

Reason 4: *For, if anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.*

This the fourth reason that Jesus gives us to persuade us that if you want to end up with your soul, you want to end up with eternal life, you will prepare to die for Jesus.

Jesus described two situations, one now and one later. Every human will be in both situations. Now, we live in an adulterous and sinful generation. God’s people have always lived in a sinful generation. Noah did. That’s the way Moses spoke about the world. John the Baptist taught that, and here Jesus does, and after him the apostles taught it. That’s the situation now.

If our sinful generation finds out that we follow Jesus and his words, they will not be impressed. If we follow Jesus and his words, our generation may well shame us. We will not have honour if they know that. So, will we hide it? Make sure they don’t find out we trust Jesus and obey his words? Being ashamed of him means we hide our loyalty.

The first situation is this adulterous and sinful generation. The second situation is the Son of Man returning in his Father’s glory with the holy angels. Every human will also experience that situation.

If we will not stand with Jesus in our sinful generation, he will not stand with us when he returns. If we say to our generation, “no, I am not with Jesus,” then when he returns, he will say, “no, that person is not with me.” And when that happens, we have lost our soul. *If we deny him, he will deny us. 2 Timothy 2.*

This day had not turned out very well for Peter and for the other disciples. At the beginning of the day, they probably didn’t even know that Jesus was the Christ. By the middle of the day, they were confident that he was the Christ. (That was the good part.)

But then Jesus gave them two difficult teachings. First, that Jesus the Christ had to suffer, be rejected, die, and then rise. Mark was written for believers, the whole Bible was ritten for believers, and Mark’s believers in Rome already know this.

The disciples did not know that, but Mark’s readers already know that, just as we already know, that Jesus had to suffer and die.

The second difficult teaching is that they themselves needed to deny themselves and follow him on that road if they wanted eternal life.

In verse 38 Jesus finally talked about the things they wanted to hear: the Son of Man coming with his Father's glory and the holy angels. Now *that* was the kingdom they wanted. This other stuff in between will have been confusing and painful.

6 Mark's Gospel

This is the most important passage in Mark. In Mark 1, we learned that Jesus was the Christ and that the Father was pleased with him. In this passage, the disciples catch up to us. Now they also know that Jesus is the Christ, as we knew from the start.

Up until now, we have watched the disciples sort out things about Jesus that we already knew. But from now on, Jesus teaches the disciples things we don't know either. At this point, Mark stops telling us a story, and starts preaching *at us*.

We want a Christ who will fix our problems. We don't want a Christ that suffered many things, whom we need to imitate. Mark's Gospel was written to people just like us.

7 Response

My first response is fear and dismay. When I was in my 20s I read Mark many times, and these lines always loomed. They were unforgettable. Habakkuk 3 says, "*I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled.*" That's how I felt.

After some time, I began to appreciate the clarity. In this teaching, Jesus gives us glasses to look differently at life when we follow him. Jesus changes how we view our lives, doesn't he. This teaching helped me understand what I had signed up for, when I decided to follow Jesus. This is how Jesus became the Lion of Judah who triumphed, and that's where it will take us, as well. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, you loved us and handed yourself over for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. You loved the church, your bride, and you handed yourself over for her to make her holy. We will praise you forever. Help us to imitate you, and to live as you lived. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.