

**Intro:**

It's Easter Sunday, and as expected we want to spend our time thinking about Jesus and the implications of who He is and what He has done. But it's also the beginning of a series about Passion, about the desires and drives we have in life that reflect what we value most in life. Over the next month we will be taking a look at the passions we have, seeing how the Bible might be relevant to them.

Now, you might wonder what passion has to do anything with Easter as well. It turns out that we get our English word passion from the story of Easter. The word passion originally meant "suffering," as applied to Jesus' suffering in his death on a cross. In many ways, our definition of passion today carries that meaning of suffering- if we're passionate about something, we are willing to suffer for it. But we've obviously deviated from its original use.

Now, the interesting thing, of course, is that the Jesus says that his passion has everything to do with our passion, our deep sense of life and value. And so it turns out that on Easter Day, as we think about this person Jesus- his life, his death and resurrection- the implications for the life we're looking for, the life we want, are huge.

I'd like to reflect on a Bible passage that talks about all this together. Let's take a look at it, and think about what it is saying about Jesus- who he is and what He's done- and why it matters to the life we want.

Read Text: Luke 9:18-26

**Who is Jesus?**

It's clear that the story starts off with a discussion of who Jesus is. This is perhaps the most important question we can ask ourselves, both then and now. There are various alternative views, of course. The disciples give a few answers that the crowds have been saying, answers that are essentially the same- you are a great prophet, a great spokesman for God, a great spiritual man. (You can look at your extra study notes for more detail about these characters). Sounds like how many of us today think about Jesus.

But that's not exactly the correct answer, and so the conversation continues. Jesus asks them what they think, and Peter, one of the disciples, says "the Christ of God." (v.20) Now, for some of us this sounds a bit strange because we tend to think the word Christ is Jesus' last name, and so it just sounds funny- the Christ of God. Its important to note that the word Christ is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word "messiah;" Peter is saying to Jesus, well you're the Messiah of God. Now, in the Hebrew/Jewish mind and worldview, the Messiah was a special figure, a Savior, who was to come and rid the world of all evil and oppression, of all injustice and animosity toward God and others, and restore the world to be a place of goodness, wholeness, peace, joy. Peter, through various means, has begun understood this.

But Peter and the others, at this juncture of the Gospel, don't understand a key part of Jesus as Messiah. Actually, two key parts. First, they don't fully get how he is actually a divine figure, God incarnate. The Title "Son of Man" is used by Jesus to refer to this- it's a reference to, among a number of things, a unique passage in the Bible where the Messiah is described as being God. (Daniel 7:13-14) Second, they don't understand that the Messiah is supposed to get rid of evil *not* through an act of sheer domination and military might, but through a path of sacrifice and death. They were hoping for the domination and military might, given what the prophets of old had said, and given the fact that they were living as an oppressed people under the "evil" Roman Empire. But Jesus says no- I'm going to get rid of evil and bring goodness and justice and peace through my suffering and death on the cross- this is what v. 21-22 speak of.

Of course, the question is why. It doesn't make sense, Peter will say in the other Gospel accounts. But it needs to happen this way, the Bible will say elsewhere, because evil is not a problem within our supposed enemies- those bad Roman oppressors out there. Evil is a problem within each of us. Messiah can't come to rid the world of evil in the way you're thinking, Peter- if he did, there would be no people left, he would have to get rid of all of us! This is how it works: the Bible says that the consequence of evil- something within all of us in varying degrees- is ultimately death and separation from all things good, both now and forever. God did not want us to face that consequence, and so he became a man to take our evil onto himself, and take the consequence of death and separation from God on the cross. Because of this, we are able to experience a life- the restored sort of life full of goodness, peace, love- life as it was meant to be.

Elsewhere the Bible says it simply:

*For our sake he (God) made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him (Jesus) we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21.*

*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds, you have been healed. 1 Peter 2:21*

So who is Jesus?

He's not merely a moral teacher or spiritual man. We often see him like this.

He's not merely a Messiah or Savior on the terms we would want, as Peter and others initially misunderstood him as.

Again, we often see him like this- he's a savior, sure, a divine figure. But he's there to simply do my bidding, like genie in a bottle.

He is the Divine Messiah who came to suffer for us, to take our evil and its consequences onto himself for us, so that we could be restored to the life God meant for us to have.

### **What does this mean for us? What does this mean for life?**

If all of what we have said has made sense to us, if there has been a God who has gone through this for us, then I'm assuming we would want to follow this God, this Messiah, to make sure that we are a part of all that He is about, and to make sure we have all of the life He wants to give.

This is where Jesus goes with the rest of the conversation- he talks about how this all becomes ours. But it's shocking, what he lays out as the way forward: he says we must go through a sort of death as well- a death of self-rule. (v.23-26)

Three actions are given- deny yourself, pick up a cross, follow Him. What we're talking about here is not self-denial, some sort of constraining of ourselves to reach some sort of goal. Most of the time people think Christianity is all about that sort of behavior, that sort of self-constraint and effort. No, we're talking about something much more deep and radical- a denial of self-rule, a regime change, if you will, where we get off the control chair and Jesus comes on. This doesn't mean you become some passive individual, or that you lose your personality- people often think that. No, it's about your ego, your pride, your desire to control, your desire to be the god of your life. It's about stepping down and letting Jesus rule. This is what cross bearing implies, too- back then, when you bore a cross you showed that you had succumbed to the rule of the Roman Empire, and that you were sentenced to death on their terms. When Jesus says you bear a cross and follow Jesus, you are submitting to the rule of Jesus, dying to yourself so that Jesus can rule over you.

You are, as Jesus goes on to say, losing your life to him so that you can actually end up gaining it.

And we're talking about gaining a the sort of life that God meant- not just getting the nice stuff we like around us (ipads, a nice job, a life partner, etc.) We're talking about that deeper life of goodness, justice, peace. That restored life- life as it was meant to be. What good is it if you gain the whole world-get all this stuff- and not have it?

Jesus is the divine suffering messiah for us- dying so that we can start living. We must die to self-rule in order to find this life. Where are you today in relationship to Jesus and the life he offers?

### **Challenge:**

The spiritual life is a journey, a process, let's acknowledge that. But I believe we are probably in at least three places here today.

*Some of us are in a place where we have yet to start the journey of discovering who Jesus is.* Maybe you've been invited here to do so today. The challenge for you today is to make a decision to start the journey, to explore who he is through things like the Friday Night discussion or a book or coming here in this next series. Or maybe you've been exploring already, and you're at that point where the choice to deny self-rule is before you today. Is Jesus asking you to take that step? Will you respond?

*Some of us are in a place where we need to re-engage the journey with Jesus.* Perhaps you were actively working on your spiritual life with him, but, for whatever different reasons, you've stopped or gotten a little half-hearted. Maybe it was because you lost some friends who used to help you in this area, or you got busy with a job or kids, or you felt a little guilty about something and it prevented you from going to God and church, whatever. But Jesus is tugging on your heart today, giving you a chance to come back. That concept of "daily" picking up the cross (v. 23) and following Jesus is something He is laying on your heart. How will you respond?

*Finally, some of us are already pretty engaged.* But the grind of our daily life has been tough. We need to be simply reminded that the point of all this is life- Jesus is wanting us to find life. And as He brings us into that life, He wants to use us to share that life with others.

I want to call up the worship team to close things up for us. And as they come up, I want to invite us all to take out our Connection Card. You know, our passage talks about how dealing with Jesus has a public dimension to it. I want to

challenge us toward that today. There are a number of things to look at on this card, but I want to direct your attention to the top right where it says "My Next Step Today." What I want to encourage us to do is this; as they get started on this song, I want us to spend a moment connecting with God, talking with Him as to what He might want from us today. And as we do so, I want us to write down one of three words that relate to what I've just said- I want us to write down either "start," "re-engage," or "share" to reflect what it is you are needing to do here today with Jesus. After the first song, we'll have a moment to pass our cards to the aisles for the greeters. Let's pray together.

**Extra Notes:**

Recommended Reading for those Starting the Journey: 1) *Reason for God* by Tim Keller, 2) *Mere Christianity* by CS Lewis, 3) *Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel (available for free at the back table)

v.19- on John the Baptist, see Luke 1:5-2:52. For Elijah, note Mal. 3:1, 4:5. Jesus was presented as a prophet like him (4:18-19, 4:25-27, 7:16). For a great prophet who has arisen- this was a common idea in Judaism of the time. Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah were the main figures.

That Jesus was more than a great spiritual teacher is clear in the records of His life in the Bible. CS Lewis, a famous skeptic-turned-Christian, once said this about our common belief that Jesus was a mere teacher: "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg--or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 41.

v. 22- for "Son of Man" as a divine figure, see Daniel 7:13-14.