

“Come, Follow Me!”
Feeling Self-Confident

Passages: Isaiah 55:6-11
 Matthew 16:13-23

Remember those ‘good old days’ when you were back in primary school? As primary students, we were so zealous to discover new things; and we were so zealous to please our teachers that, whenever the teacher asked a question, little hands would shoot up all over the room: *“I know the answer! Pick me! Pick me!”* (It was so hard not to blurt out the answer!) And then, how good did it feel when the teacher finally did pick you and you had the correct answer? You were proud! You were pumped! You were so excited that you wanted more of it!

I get the impression that, as a student in the class of ‘Rabbi Jesus’, the Apostle Peter was the overly-excited, self-confident pupil, always putting his hand up; *“Pick me, pick me!”* He was the student who would blurt out his answers before the others could get their chance. And, for the most part, his answers were correct; as in our passage for today, when Jesus asked His disciples, *“But who do you say that I am?”* Well, Peter had the right answer; *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* Indeed, you even get the impression that he was proud that he could blurt it out before the others!

But, here’s the thing: Although Peter was obviously smart... although he was quick to understand and make connections..., Jesus wanted to make one thing clear to him in response to his correct answer:

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.”

Of course, Jesus wasn’t making fun of Peter’s **self-confident** approach to life in general. There’s nothing wrong with being **self-confident** in life and relationships, school and studies, in work, or in sport. **Be self-confident** about who you are and what you can achieve!

However, **when it comes to knowing the truth about Jesus, this is not a scholastic discipline or an intellectual pursuit.** As Jesus makes clear, any real knowledge of Him comes only to us as *a gift* of God’s revelation! And although

you may be proud of your intellectual capacities; you may be proud of what you have been able to ‘work out’ (as far as your knowledge of God is concerned), true knowledge of Jesus is, essentially, *a divinely-inspired insight* where God not only speaks to our minds, but He also engages our hearts, our souls, and all our strength as well! In other words, any real truth about Jesus is meant to *captivate our whole being*, not just our minds.

What this means is, **knowing Jesus** doesn’t depend on getting high scores in your Moore College PTC courses! You can fail the exams and still know Jesus! His presence you still feel; His voice you still hear; His word you still trust; His inner peace you still know... with all your heart, mind, soul and strength!

Indeed, that’s why Peter could so quickly blurt out, “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” He did it *because the grain of wheat* that Jesus had sown earlier in his heart *was beginning to sprout into life! The yeast was working its way through the dough!* Something inside of Peter was making connections between his mind, his heart and his soul. And that’s why he cried out! Flesh and blood did not reveal this to Peter. It was a revelation from heaven.

In fact, this is the **overarching theme** that stands out through today’s passage—namely, the stark contrast between knowing Jesus through **human intelligence...** or through **heavenly revelation!**

As God once said through the prophet Isaiah;

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.⁹ “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Keep that verse in mind as we take up today’s story from **verse 21**.

But first, let’s pray.

Let me read verse 21 again: ²¹ ***From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.***

Notice the opening phrase, "**From that time on**". It's a phrase used only twice in Matthew's Gospel. The first time Matthew used it was back in chapter 4—when Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum to start His 3-year ministry.

Matthew 4:17 ***From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."***

It's clear that Matthew was marking out the beginning of a **first phase** of Jesus' life...the public, itinerant preaching phase... the phase in which Jesus goes out as an itinerant preacher and sows the Word of the kingdom of Heaven into the hearts of men and women throughout the northern region of Israel-- "**From that time on...**"

But, now, in the 16th chapter, Matthew chooses to use this same phrase again, **to mark a new phase**... a second phase...in Jesus' life and ministry. In this **second phase**, Jesus will **deliberately turn His face towards Jerusalem**. He will deliberately place Himself in the hands of the very ones who hate Him, and they will mistreat Him, falsely accuse Him, and finally murder Him by having Him nailed to a Roman cross. Astonishingly, Jesus knows that this is the path He must follow...and He's fine about it!

Moreover, even as this **second phase** of His ministry begins, Jesus knows that He must try to inform His disciples of what's going to happen to Him! He must open their minds to the larger and mysterious plan of God. He must *build upon* (and clarify) *what Peter had said earlier when he boldly declared; "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God"*! Yes... Jesus is the Messiah! Yes, Jesus is the Son of God! **But, to fully understand His Messiahship, you must understand His suffering and death in Jerusalem.** There is no other way!

The question is; **Will Peter be as good a student as he was in the earlier part of this chapter?** Will his spirit be open to accept this new teaching as *an integral part* of what he already knows about Jesus? Will he say, "*Oh, Jesus! Of course! It all makes sense! I used to think of You as simply the Messianic King and conquering Son of God! But now I see an even bigger picture. I see that you are also the One who the prophets described as God's Suffering Servant. Thank you for opening my eyes!*"? (Or, to put it in theological language, will Peter humbly accept the 'progressive revelation' of truth that Jesus is offering to him?)

Not at all! Look at verse 22!

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Obviously, Peter's mind has already been made up! The only Messiah he knows is the One who comes in victory, not in weakness. And he is so determinedly *self-confident* in his understanding that he vehemently refuses to accept any new and (what is to him) conflicting or paradoxical truths.

Now, what happens next may seem harsh...but it's extremely important for us to hear.

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!"

I couldn't imagine anything more shocking to Peter than this response from His Master. After all, Peter's intentions seem quite honourable and good. It was surely out of his love for Jesus that he was trying to protect him. He didn't want Jesus to go through pain. He didn't want Jesus to suffer a premature death. And besides, **Jesus ministry in Galilee had been so successful**; it was helping so many people! Why would you stop, now???

Jesus, however, sees a darker side to Peter's interjection. That's why He says, **"Get behind me, Satan!"** ('hupage, Satana')

Now, you need to know something, here: Jesus has already used this exact same phrase ('hupage, Satana') once before..., and it was back in chapter 4, when Satan tried to tempt Him in the wilderness! Satan tried to distract Jesus away from the cross, saying things like; *"Look, Jesus; if you're hungry, just turn these stones into bread. Take care of Yourself; there's no need to suffer! And what's wrong with being a super-hero? Just think-- When you dive off the top of the temple and land safely, everybody will applaud you! They'll all say, "He must be the Messiah of God!" What's more, I can give You all the kingdoms of the world and You'll never have to suffer and die. Why waste your life?"*

As we know, Jesus resisted those first temptations! And then, He concluded His ordeal by uttering this phrase: **"Away from me, Satan"** ('hupage, Satana').

Take a moment to make the link! That story of Jesus' *first temptation*, found in Matthew 4, is in the same chapter where the phrase **"From that time on"** is first found! In other words, the two phrases are tightly linked! Whenever Jesus was about to start a **new phase** of ministry, Satan conveniently dropped by for a visit...to see if he could distract Jesus from the cross!

That's what happening, here, in Matthew 16. It's the beginning of the **second phase** of Jesus' ministry and Satan has reappeared; this time, in the person of Jesus' best friend and closest disciple, Peter!

Jesus, however, was clearly prepared for it: "***Get behind Me, Satan.***" Jesus recognized the approach of His arch-enemy. He knew who was standing behind Peter, and that's why He spoke directly to Satan, not to Peter--"***Get behind Me, Satan.***"

As we come to the end of the story, the point I really want to highlight is not so much *Satan's temptation through Peter*, but *Jesus' response*... His response to anyone who, knowingly or unknowingly, is used by Satan to minimize, dismiss or ignore **the importance of the cross, and its role in establishing the Kingdom of Heaven on earth**. As Jesus tried to make clear to His disciples, it was a divine imperative that He

"...go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life".

Anyone who stood against this divine plan was, in fact, aligning themselves with Satan. That's why, in my mind, the most striking words in all of this passage are **Jesus' final words of rebuke** to Peter in verse 23: "***You are an offense (skandalon) to Me.***"

Do you remember this word from last week—*skandalon*? Last week, we saw how Jesus was a *skandalon* to so many people. He offended them because they didn't like what He was doing. But here, **it is Peter who is being a skandalon...to Jesus!** In what way was Peter **offending Jesus**? In Verse 23, Jesus explains: "***You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.***"

To put it another way, Peter was refusing to let the big picture of the Kingdom of Heaven inform his mind. Instead, he was letting his own self-confident understanding of things persuade him that **it was Jesus who was doing the wrong thing!** (Self-confidence can often lead to arrogance!)

Of course, that is not to say that Peter didn't understand anything about the Kingdom of Heaven! It's clear from the first part of today's passage that Peter had a fairly strong "**theology of glory**". By that, I mean, **Peter understood that God's Kingdom included miracles of healing and exorcism, of walking on water and feeding the multitudes**. In Peter's mind, these were the things (the

only things) that Jesus was on about! He was God's *glorious* "Messiah; He was the Son of the Living God"! *And in His glory, He would lead His people into glory!*

This, however, was only a half-baked vision of the whole truth about God's Kingdom! For what Peter had staunchly refused to see was that the 'big picture' of the Kingdom of Heaven includes far more than glory...(at least, not this type of glory)! Intertwined with this *theology of glory* must be a theology of divine suffering. And this is what Peter could not understand.

And who can blame him? I mean, don't we all prefer the *theology of glory*? Don't we all prefer to turn our eyes to the more glorious things of this world? Don't we all prefer to revel in what is powerful and beautiful; to seek what is encouraging and uplifting!

This, however, will never be enough if we want to truly understand God and His Kingdom! John Calvin said it this way: *All the starlit nights, summer breezes, and moving symphonies are demonstrations and visible testimonies to God's glory, filling us with awe and wonder at the grandeur of the universe. **But none of this answers the question: Where is God for me, for us, given the mess we are in right now? A theology of glory gives no comfort to a person in despair!***

We need a *theology of divine suffering*! For this is where God's love is most greatly revealed! Yes, we can partially see God's love in the stars and in the beauty of creation. And we can partially see His love in miraculous healings and exorcisms. But, if you want to **really** see God's love in its fullest, **you have to look at the cross!** Into your theology of glory, you have to accommodate this paradoxical *theology of divine suffering*.

That's because the cross reveals **four of the most fundamental aspects** of God and His love for humanity. In the cross, we see that...

1. God loves us so much that He willingly comes and shares with us in the pain of this fallen world.
2. God loves us so much that He willingly forgives us our sins, thus disarming the principalities and powers that held us captive.
3. God loves us so much that, on the cross, He not only reconciles the world to Himself and us to each other, but He foreshadows the future ministry of His church; namely, the ministry of reconciliation.
4. God loves us so much that the cross always points beyond death to the hope and joy of human resurrection.

(It's no wonder why we wear this symbol of Roman execution around our necks as jewellery! The cross speaks of love!)

Given the importance of the cross in a Christian worldview, it's no wonder why Jesus was so **offended** (*skandalizo*) by Peter! Without a **theology of suffering**, his **theology of glory** became heresy! **"You are an offense (*skandalon*) to Me."**

So, what are the lessons, here, for us?

Lesson number one—If you're looking for a Messiah of your own making...one who doesn't need to suffer...you have not only set yourself **against** the true Messiah, but, like Peter, you have become an offense (a *skandalon*) to Him.

I've got a dozen or so books on my shelf written by people who, like Peter, have had trouble accepting a *suffering Messiah*. (Now, it's not that Jesus suffered and died that bothers them, but that He did this willingly and knowingly. Marcus Borg, for example, in his book called *Jesus*, says this: *"Though not required by divine necessity, the execution of Jesus was virtually a human inevitability... Good Friday is the collision between the passion of Jesus and the domination system of his time."*) And so, Jesus is 'repackaged' as a revolutionary or a spiritual mystic who *accidentally* got caught up in someone else's revolution. In this way, Jesus becomes far easier to understand and accommodate. Tragically, it also nullifies the divine imperative of the cross.

There are others who may make occasional reference to the cross, but they prefer to spend the bulk of their time focusing on the glorious miracles of a powerful Messiah, offering guarantees of success, health and wealth. (One of America's most popular preachers, Joel Osteen, has a habit of doing this.) The *theology of divine suffering* is minimised or even eliminated while the *theology of glory* is accentuated.

This is an offense to Jesus! Why? Because it's not the full picture of who God is! By emptying the cross of its agony and shame, we destroy the complete vision of God's great love for the world! We must hold onto the cross!

There's a second lesson to be learned here. Without a **theology of divine suffering**, *we will never make sense of our own lives!* You see, a **theology of divine suffering** identifies God as the One who is hidden in the suffering of life. And although it's true that Jesus only suffered once when He died for us, there's also truth in the idea that He still suffers with us. As Thomas discovered, the nail-holes in His hands and feet, as well as His wounded side,

remain open and unhealed! If He is here, suffering in my suffering, then I can accept the difficult things in my life, without always having to dismiss them or change them. I can look directly into the pain and "call it what it is", instead of pretending that everything is OK. Sure, **self-confidence** is a great thing, but not when it makes you deny your own suffering! Indeed, it's a blessing from God to know that, not only is He hidden **in** our suffering, but He is at work in it...in our anxiety and doubt.

Take the example of an ugly, protracted divorce. He or she might say something like, "*Well, it was never a good marriage anyway,*" or "*At least I've learned a lot about myself from this whole experience.*" On the surface, this sounds fine. But in reality, this kind of rationalization tries to make something **bad** sound like it is **good**. It's a strategy that *avoids* looking at our pain and grief. It avoids acknowledging that we wish life was different, and that we are powerless to change it. As such, it avoids identifying with Jesus' wounds.

This is a big mistake! Only when we are at the end of our rope...when we no longer have hope within ourselves...that we turn to God for mercy and accept the claim that God is somehow hidden in the midst of the wreckage of our lives. It is those who are willing to admit their pain struggle and despair who will, in the end, be those who best understand **the theology of divine suffering**.

There's a third lesson to be learned. Without this **theology of divine suffering**, we cannot follow Jesus! We cannot be His disciples! You see, a **theology of divine suffering** defines life in terms of *giving* rather than *taking*, of *self-sacrifice* rather than *self-protection*, of *dying* rather than *killing*. Unlike the theology of glory, which aligns quite nicely with our natural inclination toward victory, the **theology of divine suffering** sees that the path to *winning* starts with *losing*; *we triumph through defeat*; *we become rich by giving our possessions away*.

In my very first Bible as a brand new Christian, I inscribed a poem attributed to a Confederate soldier of the Civil War.

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;
 I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.
 I asked for health, that I might do greater things;
 I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
 I asked for riches, that I might be happy;
 I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
 I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;
 I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for.
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am among all men most richly blessed.

In the end, to be a disciple of Jesus means that **the road to resurrection** always passes through **the cross**. There's no crown without thorns. There's no way for God to refine us in the image of His Son except through the fire. It's a counter-cultural message, to be sure!

But again, it reminds of the truth that God enunciated through the prophet Isaiah, almost three thousand years ago: “...***my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,***” declares the LORD.⁹ “***As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.***”

Let's pray.