



THAT TERRIBLE CUP OF GREATNESS

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Mark 10:32-45

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As we resume our studies in the gospel of Mark we come to the end of what scholars have labeled the “way”¹ section, 8:27-10:52. Through the method by which Mark has crafted his gospel we have observed that the journey of the disciples can be roughly divided into two sections. The first deals with the miracles and teaching of Jesus, which culminated in Peter’s confession that Jesus was the Messiah. From that point on, Jesus spends the rest of his ministry teaching the disciples the “way” of the Messiah.

The Christian life can also be divided into these two phases. The first phase is a miraculous journey which culminates in a miracle of sight: Jesus is the savior of the world, and Lord; then we spend the rest of our lives being shaped in the “way” of the Messiah. For many, this can be a much harder and more profound journey than conversion. A great many Christians are surprised and ill prepared for the “way” in which Jesus leads them after they come to Christ. Certainly, this was true of the disciples. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but they did not have a clue what that meant. They needed to be re-educated, a process which included three direct teachings by Jesus, bracketed by two miracles of sight (8:22-26; 10:46-52). This re-education in the “way” of the Messiah remains the major theme of Mark’s gospel all the way from the Mount of Transfiguration to the cross in Jerusalem.

I. Jesus Predicts His Own Destiny (10:32-34)

And they were on the road (lit. ‘way’), *going up* to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking on ahead of them; and they were amazed, but those who followed were fearful. And again He took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen² to Him, saying, “Behold, we are *going up* to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles. And they will mock Him and spit upon Him, and scourge Him, and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again.”

Jesus sets his face like a flint toward Jerusalem (Is 50:7), his final destiny. There he will boldly confront all the forces awaiting him. He fervently presses “toward the fate which he has predicted for himself,”³ amidst a dual atmosphere of amazement on the part of the crowd and fear on the part of his followers. The crowd, made up of pilgrims on their way to the Passover festival, is caught up with the thrill of Messianic expecta-

tion. But those closest to Jesus sense a supernatural foreboding filling the air, for what prophet was ever warmly received in Jerusalem? Indeed, few escaped alive (Mt 23:37). Sensing their fear, Jesus draws the twelve aside and for a third and final time explicitly tells them what awaits him in Jerusalem, so there will be no surprises.

Jesus opens with an emphatic “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem,” to make the point that his destiny will be their destiny too. It is critical for them to understand the “way” of their king.

Notice three things in this prediction. First, this is Jesus’ third explicit reference to his passion (8:31; 9:30,31). This reveals not only how central his passion is to the divine “way” of the kingdom, but also how slow the human heart is to accept what he has to say. If it was difficult for the disciples to hear these words, how much more so for us. But Jesus, ever patient and persistent, is determined to teach the twelve (and us by implication) until they fully understand it. This is *the* most important lesson for disciples, yet it is the most difficult to comprehend.

The second thing to note is how Jesus unabashedly uses the title “Son of Man” in reference to himself. This term is used fourteen times in Mark’s gospel. The image, which comes from Daniel 7:13,14, is used of a representative Israelite who will do battle with the pagan kingdoms of the world, which are depicted as ferocious animals. Having won the battle, he is depicted as “one like the son of man” coming on the clouds to be enthroned in heaven at Yahweh’s right hand to establish an everlasting kingdom. This was the image that seized the hearts of Jews in exile,⁴ the one they pinned their hopes on for the coming Messiah during their oppression at the hands of four different empires. Here, Jesus unabashedly claims that title for himself—a blasphemous claim were it not true.

Yet, the most surprising thing in this prediction is that this Son of Man is not described as conquering his enemies but as being conquered by them. As Jesus describes his final confrontation in Jerusalem, notice that all the verbs are passive, except for the last. He is handed over to the Sandhedrin, condemned to death, delivered over to the gentiles, who are allowed to mock him, spit on him and scourge him bloody raw, and finally kill him. Is this the divine way of Israel’s Son of Man? Appearing powerless before his enemies? Certainly, it is a mysterious way to be crowned king. Yet Jesus understood what no other rabbi or scribe in Israel had been

able to comprehend. He took the Daniel imagery not in isolation but in relation to other texts and prophecies. As he studied the prophets he was able to take this glorious title, Son of Man, which evoked feelings of elation for Israel's vindication over her enemies, and link it with Isaiah's "suffering servant"⁵ – the coming servant who would suffer for the sins of the nation, be crushed beyond recognition, despised and cast out, and then surprisingly vindicated in a resurrection on the third day.

"Yes," Jesus tells these men, "I am destined for glory, but the 'way' to glory is the terrible way of suffering and death." I wonder how much sorrow Jesus felt in this most intimate of moments as he allowed his friends to share in the fearsome knowledge of his future suffering. Yet, painfully, each time he predicts his passion, his words fall on deaf ears. In the first instance, Peter rebukes him; in the second, the disciples argue about who is the greatest; and now in the third, two disciples make a bizarre request, seeking to exploit the situation for their own personal gain.

II. Jesus Predicts the Destiny of His Disciples (10:35-45)

A. A Request for Greatness (10:35-41)

And James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Him, saying to Him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And He said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant that we may sit in your glory, one on your right, and one on your left."

The two sons of Zebedee, whom Jesus had nicknamed "sons of thunder" (3:17) because of their impulsive bombast and forceful ways, blithely ignore the implications of what he had just said, and make a request: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." They sound like a teenager asking for his father's credit card before he leaves on a trip. But Jesus would not be manipulated to sign a blank check. He asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Grant that we may sit in your glory, one your right and one on your left," they respond. These men are living up to their nicknames. With the memory of the transfiguration still fresh in their minds, and Jerusalem looming on the horizon, they see a window of opportunity to position themselves favorably before the company goes public, as it were. "Let's get in while the stock is low and the competition is limited," is their mindset. Matthew adds the detail that it was their mother who made the request on their behalf (Matt 20:20). And if she was "Jesus' aunt on his mother's side, which is not unlikely" (Carson) it would have applied a little family pressure to the request. Calvin speaks well to the point: "This narrative contains a bright mirror of human vanity; for it shows that proper and holy zeal is often accompanied by ambition."

How painful this request must have been to our Lord! It could not have come at more incongruous mo-

ment. He had just spoken of his impending death and they respond with not a hint of sorrow, seeking to exploit his death for their own advantage. This would be like hearing that your best friend has cancer and, following a quick prayer, you look him in the eye and say, "Can I have your watch?" Yet how often we use the sufferings of our Lord for personal gain rather than shedding tears of repentance.

B. Ignorance of the Way to Greatness

38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"

Jesus responds that they have no idea *what* they are asking for or the *way* one achieves it. He asks them if they are capable of drinking his cup⁶ or being baptized with his baptism. The symbol of the cup in the Hebrew Scriptures evokes the terrible image of God's wrath, which was handed to the nations to be drunk dry: "*In the hand of the Lord is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs*" (Ps. 75:8). When drained, this cup of horror and desolation would consume and make one stagger. The thought of drinking it horrified Jesus and crushed his soul. Add to that horror the image of baptism and you can feel yourself drowning in a flood of judgment. As Gundry writes, this "implies that contrary to their expectation they must drink the bitter dregs of suffering and feel a flood of woe overwhelming them if they would hope to share in his later glory."⁷ Are you able to drink this cup?

39 And they said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

As we read their naive response, "we are able," we feel the foreboding fate falling into their laps. What dignity the Lord gives us that he takes us at our word—more than we want at times. Yes, Jesus says, they will drink his cup of woe and be baptized with him in his suffering. How did James and John later reflect on this request when at the moment of Jesus' passion there were two men, one on his right and one on his left, crucified with him? Were they prepared for that humiliation? James was among the first Christian martyrs (Acts 12:2), and John, according to tradition, lived out his final years as a prisoner in Patmos.

Yes, they will drink his cup, but Jesus goes on to say that to sit on his right or left is not his to give; it is for those for whom it has been prepared. This is a clear indication that the sorrows of this life have eternal significance in the age to come, for glory is not a commodity to be handed out, but the end of a long fiery process that purifies the soul. Do you view all your sorrows in this light? Every blow to the heart, every false accusa-

tion, every painful memory of abuse or abandonment is designed to shape you for glory. Nothing is wasted, everything is significant. As Paul says, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17).

41 And hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John.

The remaining ten disciples are indignant, not because they do not share the same ambition, but because James and John made the request first and they feel they might have missed out. The result is ten divided against the two, a faint but powerful echo of Israel of old and its tumultuous civil wars: the ten tribes against the two, from which Israel never recovered. To prevent a repeat of such a terrible schism with the arrival of God’s kingdom, Jesus calls them all to himself to eradicate every trace of zealous pride.

III. Instruction on the Way to Greatness (10:41-44)

And calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.

Jesus summons the disciples for a lecture and reminds them of what they well know, the great power and authority of Rome. When the emperor in Rome spoke, entire armies moved throughout the empire. When a law was enacted at the capital, the tax was levied in Galilee. What tremendous power and authority—the few over the many. (Carson⁸ points out that the NIV translation, “lord it over,” gives a false impression. Jesus is not criticizing abuse of power in political structures, but merely contrasting “ruling over” versus “serving under.”) Every Jew understood the extent and weight of Roman authority, but what the disciples did not know was that “it is not so among you.” Greatness in the kingdom is not measured by how many serve you, but by how many you voluntarily serve. This was a radical word in a society where humility was no virtue. And lest we miss the point, Jesus intensifies his statement by adding the word *slave* of all—the most despicable social status in the Roman empire.

In God’s kingdom greatness is not measured by how many you have under your command. Greatness is not measured by how many line up and stand at attention when you present your agenda. No, greatness is based on how many hearts you have willingly won by being a servant to them in their world. And furthermore, the one you encourage them to follow is Christ, not you, so there are no banners in your wake bearing your name.

In light of this, it is fascinating to learn how many slaves came to Christ in those early days and how influential they were in spreading the gospel. Many were

pressed into service in the homes of wealthy and high ranking Roman officials and given the task of educating and shaping the children, the very future of Rome. Numerous slaves took advantage of the opportunity to teach the gospel to these young minds, leading many to Christ, right under the emperor’s nose. In Acts we read how the apostles maintained their influence because they were granted no status by the religious authorities. When they were despised and persecuted they carried out their best work in prison as slaves to the state. What a contrast three hundred years later, when Constantine pronounced Christianity the official religion of the empire and granted it social, political and economic status. This was the death-blow to spirituality and the advent of the decline of Christianity.

How we desperately need this word in a culture where we are taught that influence comes by ascending the competitive ladders, commanding more and more status, positioning ourselves early in the game and relying on networking with such speed that no one listens to a human voice and pain is covered over in a silent grave. This is the spirit that pervades our existence in this valley, but Jesus’ response is adamant: “It is not so among you.”

Henri Nouwen, who died in 1996, was one of the most influential Catholic writers of our day. In 1985 he walked away from his prestigious teaching post at Harvard University and spent a year in the intimate setting of a handicapped community called L’Arche, in France. No one in that community granted the famous author a modicum of prestige for what he had published. In fact, he found that those precious lives became a mirror to his own spiritual condition. Living with the handicapped and learning to love them and weep with them so shaped and renewed his spiritual life that he later accepted the call to their community in Toronto as his permanent home. Henri Nouwen will forever be an icon of one who in his later years became a “servant of all.”⁹

In case the disciples missed the point, Jesus drives it home even further, and with shocking clarity.

IV. The Example of Greatness (10:45)

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Even the Son of Man, the representative Israelite who receives power and dominion to rule an everlasting kingdom, did not come to earth to be served. Jesus was raised in a poor family. He never used his office to his own advantage, never experienced the comforts of wealth or the hospitality of his culture. Every heart he influenced was won by sacrificial love. But his service went even further. This Son of Man became the Suffering Servant who was crushed for our iniquities, scourged for our healing, numbered among the transgressors, and bore the sin of many as a guilt offering (53:12). And the result: “The one dies, the many find their lives ‘ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven’” (D. A.

Carson). Because of that, Jesus has been exalted. He has received power, dominion and glory forever and ever, amen.

V. Can You Drink this Cup?

Do you want to be great? Do you want to have a significant life and influence others? Then you must drink this cup. A glance at church history makes it obvious that this is the only way to greatness. Whenever God raised up a new prophetic voice to carry the gospel into new territory or bring renewal to a dead church it has always been accompanied by suffering, sorrow, and sometimes death. Yet the sweet fragrance of such a life given over to suffering brought about the salvation of the many.

As I reflect on the impact of our many missionaries overseas I am awed by their labors of a love that birthed orphanages and churches in Timor; planted a congregation in the Mafia capital of Italy; established a biblical training center in refugee camps in Ghana; completed a New Testament in far away Capul in the Philippines; gave to the Tarahumara Indians in Mexico a whole new language and way of life in the gospel; started a church in Moldova and made disciples in Romania. Yet anyone who is close to these brothers and sisters knows the deep sorrow they have endured through sickness, poverty, hazards, loneliness, depression, threats and persecution.

Currently I am reading one of most powerful manuscripts of a holy life that I have ever encountered. Several years ago, we commissioned a dear Romanian sister, Ligia Oprean, to translate into English the autobiography of Traian Dorz, the Romanian poet. She has now completed the task and the manuscript will be fully edited in the next few months. However, I could not wait for the final edit, since I've been waiting anxiously over the last ten years to read the story of this man's life. I met Traian Dorz briefly in 1988. He said to me, "You teach about the cross. We live under the cross." Those words have haunted me for ten years. Reading his biography, I now understand the weight of his words.

Traian Dorz was the disciple of Iosif Trifa, a young priest who poured his whole life into reviving his people with the gospel by publishing Christian literature. He labored incessantly and faced cruel persecution until his premature death. Traian took over the work and shortly thereafter was imprisoned in a cruel hell during different intervals totalling seventeen years, from 1948 into the 1980's. Six different times all his property was confiscated. Shortly after his first imprisonment, all his works of poetry, children's books and other writings, twenty years of work, enough to fill an ox cart, were confiscated and burned before his eyes. Over many days in his early imprisonments he was severely beaten. He was forced to live in conditions comparable to Auschwitz.

Yet over the entire duration of this cruel torture, Traian Dorz knew that he was in prison by the hand of God. He knew that his imprisonment was necessary to spread God's word, and he gave thanks to God. The Securitate could take everything from him but his memory. From memory he began recreating the poetry of his immortal songs. At one point he found a broken shard of glass, and each day he covered it with lime dust and etched out a poem, memorizing each one for thirty days at a time. What an amazing spirit this man possessed! His penetrating gaze could look deep into the eyes of his captors and, like Paul, speak to them of the sweetest salvation. At 70 years of age, broken in body, Traian Dorz was thrown into prison one last time, this time into the darkest pit, filled with gypsy murderers and vile creatures. He said it was like living with the devil himself. Yet he felt that God had sent him there for their salvation. He wrote:

the only way to prove my faith to them and to make a way toward their hearts was to give them the little provision I had: my clothes, my food, my medicines. It was only after seeing this behavior day by day for three months, that they began getting closer to me and listened a little about God...There is no better way to get close to people in order to bring them to God, than the way of sacrificial love. There is a way, if you stay hungry and give them your food; if you can shiver and give them your clothing; if you can endure pain and give them your medicine; if you can remain dirty and give them your soap; if only you can...

Traian Dorz did, and four of those condemned gypsies came to Christ.

Meditating over each page of this manuscript has given me a better vision of Christ who endured such hostility for my sake, and who says to me and to you, "Will you drink this cup?"

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1. The word "way" occurs in Mark at 8:27 and at 10:53, forming an inclusio indicating the theme of this section.
2. "what was going to happen to Him": the verb "happen" was sometimes used in reference to death and is found in the last will and testament of Aristotle (Diog. L. 5,11;12). There is also a word-play in the text with "going up...to go together [i.e. to happen]...we are going up," which emphasizes that the "way" of Jesus shall without a doubt also be the way of the disciples.
3. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 570.
4. See 1 *Enoch* 45:3-4; 46:4-5; 48:1-49:4; 61:8-9; 62:1-9; 63:11.
5. Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-13; 50:4-10; 52:13-53:12.
6. On the "cup" see Isa 51:17, 22; Jer 25:15,17,28; Ezek 23:31; Zech 12:2.
7. Gundry, 577.
8. D.A. Carson, "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 432.
9. Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey*, (New York: Doubleday, 1988) tells the story of that year.