

The Way Forward

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I honestly thought I understood marriage before my wedding. After all, I knew countless couples who had been married for years and others whose marriages had ended in divorce. So I assumed that I understood the joys and struggles of being in that type of relationship. And that assumption lasted right up until the moment I actually got married.

I could say the same thing about being a minister because I was a clergy kid and lived in a manse so I thought I knew what ministry was about. And I worked with children for years before having my own so I thought I knew what parenting was like. I thought I understood but I quickly discovered that until you actually experience those things you don't really understand them.

Jesus is walking with the disciples in Jerusalem and the disciples are admiring the beauty and majesty of the holy city. And Jesus reminds them that everything around them will fall apart and that difficult times will happen before the promise of God becomes a reality throughout the earth.

And the disciples ask the question all of us are wondering. "When? When will those times happen? How will we know? What should we look for?" The disciples are looking for a time line, things to watch for so they know when times are going to get hard. And we want to know too so we listen carefully.

And Jesus continues by saying there will be wars and civil unrest, natural disasters, and turmoil in every land. And if that isn't bad enough Jesus talks about persecutions and troubles that will happen for the followers and people of God.

And at that point the disciples and all of us are waiting for Jesus to tell us how to avoid these things, to warn us what to expect, to caution us that if they aren't good people these things will happen. But then the conversation takes a strange turn.

Because Jesus doesn't teach us on how to escape from those days. No, instead Jesus tells us that they will be an opportunity for us to witness and testify. To be the people who show the truth of the good news and share the gospel message through our lives. And he finishes with saying that we may go through pain and sorrow and be hated "But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance

you will gain your souls.”

And that is not what we want to hear. Because when we look around at our lives and see the great things, the good times and good people in them, we want those things to remain the way they are. We want our world to remain calm and predictable and comfortable. We don't want upset and turmoil. We don't want to face trouble and persecution.

If you will it is like hearing that a storm is coming. We want to be ready, to be aware, to know when it is coming because we want to keep our lives normal until the last possible moment. And then we want to retreat away from the storm until it passes. And in our passage Jesus goes on in great lengths about how bad things will be. So we're expecting and wanting him to tell us how to avoid those things. But instead Jesus teaches about how we are to live in the storm while it rages around us.

Because we might think that a life of faith, a good life, is about avoiding hard days and difficult times but the truth is much different. But while we think we know what is coming the truth is that we have no idea what those days will be like until we experience them. Like me getting married, becoming a minister, being a parent, we have thoughts on what life should be like. And with his words Jesus tells us that all our knowledge, impressions, ideas about how things should be don't capture the reality of how we should live.

Because we think that the way through trouble is to get away from the difficulties and to avoid them. But Jesus reminds us that the only way forward and indeed that way for us to live as people of faith is in the midst of the difficult times and troubling days. And Jesus reminds us of the great things that we can do and the power we have to share the grace, love, and promise of God with those around us.

For when shadows gather, we can shine with the light of Christ and God knows the world needs that light to show the better way. In the waters of uncertainty, we can tell of the promises of God and God knows that our witness may a life line for those lost and alone. In the times of despair, we can be examples of the forgiveness and salvation of the cross and God knows that our lives may be the invitation others need to discover grace for themselves.

Jesus is quite clear “By your endurance you will gain your souls.” We’re not yet the people God calls us to be. Our faith needs to be stronger. Our love needs to be deeper. Our growth as followers needs to continue. And we get all of that. But in our minds that is going to happen when things are good. When life is going well we’re going to be faithful. When the neighbour we like is in need we’ll be loving. When we want to be thankful then we’ll pray. And that all may be true.

But Jesus draws our attention to the fact that faith is when we hold firm to the promises of God when everything is going wrong in our lives. Love is when we help the neighbour we don’t know or don’t like. A disciple is one who listens to Jesus even when the whole world says that is the wrong way. We grow in faith, deepen our love, and truly follow Jesus when we continue to be God’s people in the midst of trouble, despair, pain, and sorrow.

Now I can’t tell you what is going to happen in the days to come other than to tell you that there will be good times and I know there will be difficult days and hard choices to make. That is life. And there is no secret to know when turmoil will happen and everything you know will suddenly be different.

Sometimes that happens because we choose to share our lives with another person, or start a family, or begin a new part of our lives. And sometimes change happens because of circumstances and events beyond our control. But as Jesus reminds us that isn’t the point.

The point is that no matter what is happening, we can be good people, God’s people, in the world. We can take time to give, to care, to love, to forgive, to be role models who are clear about what we believe and why we believe. And when we do those things, when we make that choice to be signs and examples of what God can do in our lives, then we find our lives become complete or in the words of the gospel “we gain our souls.”

Because Jesus calls us to follow. And while we have known Christians and good people around us, and while we may have learned from them what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus, the truth is salvation has to be lived. Because when we follow Jesus we experience faith not merely as an idea or a concept but as the way we discover and know the meaning and power of God’s grace and love in our lives and in our world.