

“The Ransom & the Cup”
Mark 8:27-33, 9:30-32, 10:32-34, 10:38, 10:45
April 13, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to the Gospel of Mark.

Over the past weeks we have heard Jesus predict his coming death and resurrection three times. Each time he follows that prediction with an additional teaching on what it means to follow him, and each time we’ve focused on that additional teaching.

This morning, we bring these three predictions together and focus on what they have to teach us about Jesus Christ and his work.

With that said, we turn now to portions of Mark 8, 9, and 10.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

First, from Mark 8:

^{8:27} And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸ And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹ And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” ³⁰ And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Then from Mark 9:

^{9:30} They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” ³² But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

And from Mark 10:

^{10:32} And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³ saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. ³⁴ And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.”

Then jumping down to verse 38:

³⁸ Jesus said to them, [...] “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”

And then in verse 45 he adds:

⁴⁵ “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, our eyes long for your salvation
and for the fulfillment of your righteous promises.
Deal with us, your servants, according to your steadfast love,
and teach us your statutes.
We are your servants, and so we ask you to give us understanding,
that we may know your testimonies.
As we attend to your word now,
help us to love it more than gold, even much fine gold.
Grant this, we ask, in Jesus’s name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:123-125, 127-128]

Introduction

Our texts this morning get at the heart of why Jesus came, and what he sought to accomplish.

And one thing that becomes clear in this passage is that during his earthly ministry, even Jesus’s closest followers were perplexed and confused about what Jesus came to do. And we can be as well.

And so it’s important when we come to these passages – even if we’ve been Christians all our lives – it’s important to pause at these passages and consider our own understanding of what Jesus came to do.

And what we see in these passages is that Jesus knows our greatest need better than we do, and he has met it in his sacrificial death on the cross.

Jesus Christ knows our greatest need better than we do, and he has met it in his sacrificial death on the cross.

Let’s break that down together.

Jesus Knows Our Greatest Need Better Than We Do

First, what we see repeatedly in these texts is that Jesus knows our greatest need better than we do.

If we're honest ... it can often feel to us like what we think our greatest need is ... is different from what God thinks our greatest need is.

We are so often focused on our finances, or our reputation, or our success, or our physical health, or our daily happiness ... and to be sure the Bible tells us that God is not indifferent to those things – he cares about them for his people.

But at the same time, if we read the Bible, or even if we just look at how God works in the world, it also becomes fairly clear to us that God does not regard those things as our greatest need. Those things are not his top priority for us. Which can sometimes leave us frustrated and perplexed.

And the disciples experience something like that here in these passages.

Take a look at our text from chapter eight. Peter identifies Jesus as the Christ – the Messiah. This is the One Israel has hoped for to meet their greatest needs – which they assume means freeing them from Roman rule, casting out their evil leaders, and restoring them as a prosperous and glorious nation. But then just a few verses later Jesus starts talking about how instead of doing all that when they get to Jerusalem ... his plan is to die for them.

No wonder Peter rebuked Jesus. As far as Peter could see, Jesus was getting it all wrong. Because Jesus and Peter had very different ideas about what Peter's greatest need really was.

Then in our passage from chapter 9, Jesus predicts his death and resurrection again. And once more, the disciples don't get it – they're confused, we're told in verse 32, and afraid to even ask what Jesus is talking about. Because Jesus and the disciples still had very different ideas about what the disciples greatest need really was.

And then, in our passage from chapter 10, again Jesus predicts his death and resurrection, now with even more detail. And as we saw last week, once more the disciples didn't get it, and they continued to assume that Jesus was going to Jerusalem to reign, because that's what they believed their greatest need was: the right ruler in Jerusalem, with the right people in his cabinet.

The disciples want certain things from Jesus. But Jesus keeps making it clear that they have a greater need, which they're failing to appreciate – and it's that need that Jesus is focused on.

As one commentator puts it: “Jesus does not leave any doubt about what he came to do: He came to die.” [Keller, 151]

Jesus's death was not an incidental or unfortunate end to his work on earth. It was his focus and his goal.

Which makes no sense ... unless you know what your greatest need is.

And so what is our greatest need? If we believe that Jesus really has come from God – if we believe that Jesus himself really is God, then surely we must also believe that Jesus knows better than we do what our greatest need is. So what does Jesus say our greatest need really is? And what does it have to do with his death?

Well, Jesus begins to answer that question in verse 45. There he tells us that he came, specifically, “to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Now ... what does that mean?

For us, the word “ransom” is used only really in relation to a kidnapping. But the Greek word translated there meant: “to buy the freedom of a slave or a prisoner.” As one commentator explains, in the ancient world, “The ransomer would make a huge sacrificial payment that matched the value, or paid the debt of the slave or the prisoner in order to procure his or her freedom.” [Keller, 153; see also Edwards, 327]

In other words, Jesus is telling us that our greatest problem is not the external circumstances we so often focus on ... but our greatest need is that we are slaves – we are prisoners ... and most of the time we don’t even notice it.

It's an obvious illustration ... but it makes me think of the movie *The Matrix*. The idea of the movie is that everyone in the world is going about their lives focused on ordinary things: doing their jobs, paying their mortgages, raising their kids, and so on ... but what they don’t realize is that they’re actually all enslaved to an army of robots – in the real world, they’re being used to fuel the energy needs of the robots, and their minds are each plugged into a computer matrix, which produces a simulated world for them ... which they think they live in and which is designed primarily to distract them ... with jobs, and mortgages, and household responsibilities ... so that they don’t realize that their biggest problem is actually that they are slaves.

Now ... we don’t live in a simulation. The world we live in is real, and God cares about it. But the parallel is that in this fallen world we too are often so distracted by things that seem pressing, that seem urgent, that seem to be the most important ... that we utterly fail to pay attention to, or maybe even notice, our greatest problem: that we, in our natural state, left to ourselves, are slaves of sin – prisoners of sin.

We are slaves. And we don’t need a red pill to see it. It’s right there in front of us. We just always turn away from it.

We know in our hearts that something is wrong with us. So often we do those things that we don’t want to do ... even things we hate ... and then we don’t do those things that we know we should do. So often we don’t live up to the standards that we have for other people. We know this about ourselves. We know something is wrong – something about us isn’t working as it should. And the Bible’s explanation is that our hearts – our souls – have become enslaved to sin ... we are prisoners to it.

But the Bible tells us that we’re a very specific kind of slave.

You see, in the ancient world, there were different kinds of slaves. Some were enslaved through no fault of their own: they were conquered in a war, or kidnapped and sold to others, or born through no fault of their own into the condition.

But others in the ancient world put themselves into slavery. They amassed a debt they could not pay. And as a result, they were sold into slavery – in a sense they sold themselves into slavery – to pay off their massive debts. And in order for a debt slave to be set free, someone else offered to pay off their debt for them instead. In such cases, this is the ransom that Jesus speaks of in verse 45.

And in many ways, that's the kind of slaves to sin that we are.

For one thing, our slavery too is linked to a massive debt. Our selfish and sinful actions have accrued a moral debt – a spiritual debt – we have racked up a bill, a set of moral fines, that we can never afford to pay.

And so, if we are not just slaves to sin, but debt-slaves to sin, then with that comes the realization that a moral and spiritual debt hangs over our heads, and that is what holds us in captivity and bondage to sin and misery.

But it's not just that. Because also ... and maybe most distressingly ... if we are debt-slaves to sin ... then we have put ourselves in this position. We have sold ourselves into slavery to sin.

It began with our first parents, who rejected God's good gifts for them, and instead willingly gave themselves and posterity over to serve sin and death.

In some mysterious sense, we all sinned with them and in them ... but even beyond that, each of us have in our own individual lives reaffirmed that decision with every misdeed: every action we know is wrong that we've done anyway, every time we've chosen sin against God over obedience to God, every time we've chosen selfishness towards others over love towards others, every time we've chosen evil and darkness over goodness and light. Deep down, we all know this about ourselves ... but we don't want to see it. We avert our eyes. We redirect our attention. And we try to convince ourselves that other things are our real problem ... and not the reality that we, in our hearts, have made ourselves slaves to sin.

But Jesus knows better. Jesus knows that our greatest problem is different from what we claim. Jesus knows that our truest need is to be freed from sin: to be bought back from slavery to sin and selfishness, and brought back into a right relationship with God and with one another.

That is what Jesus is aiming for. That is why he's so focused on the cross. Because on the cross, he plans to ransom us – on the cross he plans to ransom all his people from slavery to sin and death, and to return us once more to a right relationship with God.

So the first thing we see here is that Jesus knows our greatest need better than we do. And our greatest need is to have our spiritual debts paid so that we can be freed from slavery to sin and death.

And He Has Met It In His Sacrificial Death on the Cross

But then the second thing we see is that Jesus didn't just come to teach us about that need. He came to meet that need.

Jesus knows our greatest need better than we do, and he has met it in his sacrificial death on the cross.

As one author puts it, this fact "sets [Jesus] apart from the founder of every other major religion. Their purpose was to live and be an example. Jesus's purpose was to die and be a sacrifice." [Keller, 153]

But how does Jesus's death on the cross meet our greatest need?

Well, it does that by paying the debt that we owe to God.

God is angry with our sin.

This is what's at the root of Jesus's comment, in verse 38, about the cup that he has to drink. What's that about?

Well, Jesus is referring to a cup that comes up several times in the Hebrew Scriptures. It's a cup God speaks to his people about. And it's the cup of God's wrath.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of this cup of God's wrath. [51:17] The prophet Jeremiah tells us that it is the "cup of the wine of wrath" that is in God's hand, [25:15] that makes those who receive it "a desolation and a waste, a hissing and a curse" [25:18] because God "has an indictment against" them and "he is entering into judgment" of them. [25:31]

Psalms 11 speaks of it as a cup of "fire and sulfur and scorching wind." [11:6] The prophet Ezekiel speaks of it as "a cup of horror and desolation," [23:33] the prophet Habakkuk speaks of it as a cup that brings "utter shame." [2:16] It is a cup, Psalm 75 says, that God has prepared for "all of the wicked of the earth." [75:8]

And we should be clear that "all the wicked of the earth" is not a select few – because as the Apostle Paul reminds us: "all [...] are under sin [...] all have turned aside" from God. [Romans 3:9,12]. And the result of our sin is that a cup of God's wrath has been prepared for all of us.

We – you and I – deserve to have to drink down that cup of desolation and shame. Because of our sin.

This is the cup Jesus refers to in verse 38. It's the same cup he speaks of in the Garden of Gethsemane – the cup he knows he will receive on the cross: the cup of God's wrath.

Now some of us want to push back against this idea up front. "I don't believe in a God of wrath," we might say. "I believe in a God of love."

It's a common sentiment in our culture. But it doesn't actually make any sense.

Tim Keller puts it like this – he writes: “The problem is that if you want a loving God, you have to have an angry God. [...] Think about it,” he continues. “Loving people can get angry, not in spite of their love but *because* of it. In fact, the more closely and deeply you love people in your life, the angrier you can get. Have you noticed that? When you see people who are harmed or abused, you get mad. If you see people abusing themselves, you get mad at *them*, out of love. Your sense of love and justice are active together, not in opposition to each other. If you see people destroying themselves or destroying other people and you *don't* get mad, it's because you don't care. [...] The more loving you are, the more ferociously angry you will be at whatever harms your beloved.”

And “The Bible tells us that God loves everything he has made. That's one of the reasons he's angry at what's going on in his creation; he is angry at anything or anyone that is destroying the people and world he loves. His capacity for love is so much greater than ours – and the cumulative extent of evil in the world is so vast – that the word *wrath* doesn't really do justice to how God rightly feels when he looks at the world.”

“So,” Keller concludes, “it makes no sense to say, ‘I don't want a wrathful God, I want a loving God.’ If God is loving and good, he must be angry at evil.” [Keller, 193-194]

In a fallen world, there is no love without anger. Because anger is the right response to sin and brokenness damaging and degrading the object of our love.

And God loves the people and the things he has made.

But we have sinned against them all. We've sinned against other people whom God loves: using them, degrading them, manipulating them, taking from them, hating them, mocking them, and more.

We've sinned against our own being which God loves: harming ourselves, degrading ourselves, filling our own hearts with grumbling and discontentedness instead of gratitude and thankfulness.

We've sinned against creation, taking what God has made, and in a variety of ways twisting it against his will, or destroying it without regard for the God who made it.

We have damaged and degraded people and things that God loves. And he is angry.

It is that anger – it is that wrath – that Jesus volunteered to receive on our behalf. He took onto himself the wrath of God for the damage we have done to others. That's what he did on the cross.

But it was even more than that. Because God is not just angry because we've sinned against others whom he loves. He's also angry because we've sinned against him. And that, too, is a function of his love.

Have you ever had someone close to you – someone whom you love – betray you in a deep and serious way? I'm sure many of you have ... and if not, you can imagine it.

How do we feel when someone close to us – someone we love – hurts and betrays us deeply ... and I don't just mean they do something that disappoints us generally, but they do something that feels aimed at us personally, that seems to target us for betrayal or harm: whether it's our parent,

or our child, or our spouse, or our sibling, or our close and trusted friend. Someone we love. Someone we have sought to care for. We have loved them. And they have responded by betraying us, and hurting us.

When that happens, we feel anger. And often that anger is in proportion to our love. And, in fact, a lack of anger in such situations can often reveal a lack of love. The person who hears their spouse has cheated on them, and then responds with a smile and a shrug doesn't communicate love ... but indifference. The parent who is unaffected by their child disowning them and cutting off communication with them, isn't displaying love, but a distressing detachment. The friend who responds to betrayal without any emotional response... seems cold, not loving.

And a God who responds to us breaking faith with him, betraying him, rebelling against him, and committing spiritual adultery against him, over and over again – a God who responds to that ... with a smile ... and a shrug ... that is not a loving God.

When we are betrayed by someone we truly love, we feel deep anger and distress. And we have two main choices for what we can do with that.

One is that we can pour that wrath out on the other person. We can seek to crush them, to destroy them, to extract vengeance on them for what they have done to us. That's one option.

The other option is that we can take that wrath and take that pain ... and let it crush our hearts. We can hurt instead of inflicting that hurt on them.

And those of you who have been through such betrayals ... and forgiven the one who betrayed you ... you know that this is what forgiveness is like. Forgiveness in such cases isn't light and easy. It's not a smile and a shrug. Forgiveness – when sins are grievous – forgiveness hurts. Forgiveness can cause us pain and anguish. Because we let our response to such sin crush our hearts, instead of crushing the other person ... we hurt, instead of inflicting that hurt on them.

And that's what's happening on the cross. The cross is, in some sense, God letting us see the internal process that must go on within God if he is going to forgive us. Because the anger is God's anger at our betrayal of him. But also, the One who suffers the effects of that anger on the cross is God himself, come in human form. In the cross God lets us see that he himself is choosing to hurt, rather than inflict the hurt on us that we deserve for our betrayal of him.

Betrayal, in a loving relationship, is like pulling the pin out of a grenade. That grenade is going to go off. And we have a choice. We can let it blow up on the person who has harmed us. Or, in love, we can throw ourselves on the grenade, taking the explosion onto ourselves, and shielding the one we love from the full blast of what their sin has done.

The cross is Jesus jumping on the grenade.

God's anger is not in opposition to his love. It's not like our often selfish or self-serving anger. God's anger is born of his love. God's anger is the fruit of his love.

And we have provoked that anger in so many ways. We have sinned against his creation, which he loves. We have sinned against his creatures – the people around us, who are made in his image, whom he loves. We have sinned against him, betraying him again and again, after all he has done

for us: giving us life, and being, and every good thing that we have. Our sin has piled up, moment to moment, day to day, year to year.

And a cup of wrath has accumulated for each of us to drink. A cup that would overwhelm us – a cup that would destroy us.

And then God himself came in the person of Jesus Christ.

And on the cross, God drank that cup himself.

On the cross God received the punishment due to us.

On the cross God paid the debt that we owed.

And as a result, we are free. We are ransomed from sin, and death, and Satan.

But even more than that, we are free to enter into a right relationship with God.

As the chains of our slavery to sin and death fall off, God does not leave us to ourselves. He opens his arms to us. He opens the door of his house to us.

In the gospel, Jesus, with his blood, purchased us from slavery, and then made us his own. And in his mercy, he will love us, and care for us, now and forever.

That is our greatest need. And Jesus Christ has met it in his sacrificial death on the cross.

Conclusion

In response ... Jesus calls us to turn to him.

In response, Jesus calls on us to look to him in faith.

In response, Jesus calls us to “receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.”

And when we do ... we are freed from sin ... our crushing moral debt is removed from us ... and the cup of wrath we deserved is taken from us ... because Jesus takes it all to himself ... and gives us instead life, and joy, and peace, and a relationship with him.

If you already know the Lord, then remember that this morning.

Don't let the world tell you that you are still a powerless slave to sin ... because you have been ransomed.

Don't let your heart tell you that you are still in spiritual debt for your sin ... because Jesus has paid your debt in full.

And don't let the Devil tell you that God still has a cup of wrath prepared for you ... because Jesus has already drained that cup down to its dregs himself.

If you have trusted in Christ, then you are free, you have been ransomed, and God welcomes you in love.

Believe that again this morning.

And if you do not yet know the Lord ... then I urge you to turn to him.

Why remain a slave ... when Jesus offers you freedom?

Why remain in crushing moral and spiritual debt ... when Jesus offers to pay it for you?

Why receive the cup of God's wrath – of his just judgment, his desolation and curse – when Jesus has offered to drink it down for you?

Turn to Jesus and he will make you free.

Even better than that, he will make you his own. For that is why he came – to serve and to purchase for himself people like you.

For Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, even the foremost of sinners, so that in us his perfect love might be displayed for the world to see. [1 Timothy 1:15-16]

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Let's Study Mark*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999.
Horne, Mark. *The Victory According to Mark: An Exposition of the Second Gospel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.
Keller, Timothy. *Jesus the King*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2011.
Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.