Section 1 - First Announcement of Christ’s Death

Matt. 16:21-28; Mark 8:31-38; Luke 9:22-27

Jesus did not speak about His death in plain, unmistakable terms until the later part of His public ministry. In fact, His work was drawing to a close when He began to speak clearly about it. From the very beginning He had known about this solemn event and revealed His thoughts about what was coming for Him by making occasional references to it. When He mentioned it earlier in His ministry, however, it was always couched in mystical language. He spoke in riddles, and their meaning did not become clear until after the event. But before the crucifixion took place, none could understand or, at least, no one did understand. At one time, Jesus spoke about a temple. He said if it was destroyed, He would raise it again in three days (Jn. 2:19). At another time, He mentioned a lifting up of the Son of man and compared it to the lifting up of the bronze serpent in the wilderness (Jn. 3:14). And on yet other occasions, He spoke about a sad separation of the bridegroom from the children of the bride-chamber (Mt. 9:15), about the giving of His flesh for the life of the world (Jn. 6), and about a sign like that of the prophet Jonah, which would be given by His very life to an evil and adulterous generation (Mt. 16:4).

After the conversation in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus changed His style of speaking about His sufferings. Instead of using dark, hidden allusions, He substituted literal, matter-of-fact statements (Mk. 8:32). This change was naturally adapted to the altered circumstances in which He was placed. The signs of the times were growing darker. Storm clouds were gathering in the air. All things were beginning to point toward Calvary. His work in Galilee and the provinces was nearly done. Only one thing was left to be done: to bear witness to the truth in and around the Holy City. There was a certain mood that the ecclesiastical authorities and the leaders of religious society had. It was manifested by the questions they asked (which were simply designed to find fault) and by their unreasonable demands (Mt. 15:1ff; 16:1ff). They were spying on Him, watching His every move. So it was not difficult to foresee that it would not take many more offenses, nor a much longer time, before their dislike and jealousy were ripened into murderous hatred. Therefore, this kind of plain speaking about what was going to happen soon was natural and appropriate. Jesus was now entering into the valley of the shadow of death. So, by speaking this way, He was only adapting His talk to the situation.
This plain speaking was not only natural for Christ; it was necessary and safe for His disciples. It was necessary so that they might be prepared for the coming event - prepared as far as was possible for these men. Until the very end, they had persisted in hoping that the issue would be different from what their Master had anticipated. It was safe. For now, the subject could be spoken about plainly without causing serious risk to their faith. If the disciples had not been established in the doctrine of the person of Christ, the doctrine of the cross might have scared them away. Premature preaching about a Christ who was to be crucified could have caused them not to believe in the fundamental truth that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ. Therefore, Jesus took their weakness into consideration and remained quiet about His sufferings until their faith in Him, as the Christ, was sufficiently rooted. Their faith needed to be able to withstand the storm that would soon arise. It would come by a very unexpected, unwelcome, and incomprehensible announcement. It was only after Jesus heard Peter’s confession that He was satisfied that the strength necessary for enduring the trial had been attained.

Therefore, “from that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day” (Mt. 16:21). Every clause in this solemn announcement demands that we look at it carefully with reverence.

Jesus showed His disciples:

1. **That He must go to Jerusalem.** Yes! It is there that the tragedy must be carried out. That was the appropriate place for the incredible events that were about to take place. It was dramatically proper that the Son of Man die in that “holy,” unholy city. It had earned a reputation as a city that murdered her prophets and stoned those whom God sent to her. “It cannot be” – it was incongruous - “that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem” (Lk. 13:33). He would suffer there also due to the dignity of Jesus and to the design of His death. He must not die in an obscure place or in an obscure way. It had to happen in the most public place and in a formal, judicial manner. He must be lifted up in full view of the whole Jewish nation, so that everyone could see Him whom they had pierced, and by whose stripes also they might yet be healed. The **Lamb of God** must be slain in the place where all the legal sacrifices were offered.

2. **And suffer many things.** There are too many sufferings to mention, and they are too painful to speak about in detail. It is better to pass over them in silence for right now. The plain fact was that their beloved Master was to be executed without His having committed any crime - this would be terribly difficult for the disciples. So Jesus mercifully hid most of His thoughts from them. In a later conversation on the same, sad subject - when His passion was near - He opened up with them and told them about some of the “many things.” But even then, He was restrained in what He shared. In a passing word, He only hinted that He would be mocked,
scourged, and spit upon (Mk. 10:34; Lk. 18:32). He took no pleasure in elaborating on such agonizing scenes. He was willing to bear those indignities, but He did not care to speak about them any more than was absolutely necessary.

3. From the elders and chief priests and scribes. However, they were not the only ones who had a hand in mistreating the Son of Man. The Gentile rulers and the people of Israel were involved along with the Jewish religious leaders. But the parties named in this passage of Scripture were the prime movers and the most responsible agents in the criminal actions taken against Him. The same men who should have taught the people to recognize that Jesus was the Lord’s Anointed would urge them on to cry out, “Crucify Him, crucify Him.” By pleading and making threats, they urged ungodly authorities to perpetrate a crime for which they had no heart. Gray-haired elders who were sitting in council would solemnly decide that He was worthy of death. High priests would utter oracles, that one man must die for the people so that the whole nation would not perish. Scribes who were educated in the law would use their legal knowledge to invent believable grounds for an accusation involving capital punishment. Jesus had already suffered many petty annoyances from these people. But the time was approaching when nothing would satisfy them but getting Jesus - the object of their hatred - cast out of the world. Pity Israel, when her wise men, her holy men, and her educated men knew of no better use to make of the precious stone chosen by God than to contemptuously and blatantly throw it away!

4. And be killed. Yes, and for the blessed purposes that were pre-ordained by God. But Jesus does not speak about these now. In this first lesson on the doctrine of the cross, He simply states, in general terms, the fact of His death. Anything more at this point would have been wasted words. Why speak about the theology of the cross, about God’s great design in the death which was to be brought about by the hands of guilty men, to disciples who were even unwilling to receive the facts? First, they had to get over the shock of the unwelcome announcement. Then they could talk about the meaning of the cross. Therefore, Jesus does not mention a syllable here about salvation by the death of the Son of Man, nor about Christ being crucified for man’s guilt as well as by man’s guilt. Only the hard, plain fact is stated. Theology is reserved for another time, when the hearers would be in a better frame of mind for receiving instruction.

5. Be raised up on the third day. This was the final thing Jesus told His disciples. Such an explicit reference to the resurrection at this early date has seemed improbable to some people. To us, on the contrary, it seems to be especially timely. When would Jesus most likely tell His disciples that He would rise again shortly after His death than on the occasion when He first told them plainly that He would die? He knew how difficult one announcement would be for His faithful ones. So it was natural for Him to add the other. He hoped that when it was understood that His death was to be succeeded by the resurrection - after a brief interval of three days - the news would be
much less hard to bear. Therefore, after He spoke the sad words, with characteristic tenderness He quickly said, “and be raised on the third day” - that having been torn, He might be healed, and having received blows, He might be restored.

These serious words spoken by Jesus were far from being well-received by His disciples. Neither now, nor at any time after this, did they listen to the warnings of their Lord with approval. And there was certainly no cheerful acceptance nor spiritual joy. They never heard Him speak of His death without feeling pain. In fact, their only comfort with these kinds of announcements seems to have been the hope that He was taking too pessimistic a view of the situation, and that His fears would be groundless. As far as they were concerned, they could not see any grounds for such dark feelings, and their Messianic ideas did not allow them to be on the lookout for these. They did not have the slightest notion that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer. On the contrary, a crucified Christ was a scandal and a contradiction to them. It was the same for the majority of the Jewish people after the Lord had ascended into glory. Therefore, the more firmly they believed that Jesus was the Christ, the more confusing it was to be told that He must be put to death. They asked themselves, “How can these things be? How can the Son of God be subjected to such humiliation? How can our Master be the Christ - as we strongly believe - who has come to set up the divine kingdom and to be crowned its King with glory and honor and yet, at the same time, be doomed to undergo the awful fate of a criminal execution?” The Twelve could not answer these questions now, nor until after the Resurrection. This should not be surprising. For if flesh and blood could not reveal the doctrine of the person of Christ, it certainly could not reveal the doctrine of His cross. They could not understand the simplest elements of that doctrine without special illumination from Heaven. Nor could they see that nothing was more worthy of the Son of God than for Him to humble Himself and subject Himself to death - even death on the cross. The glory of God consists not merely in His being the highest. Rather it is this: that being high, He stoops in lowly love to bear the burden of His own sinful creatures. Nothing could more directly and certainly lead to the establishment of the divine kingdom than the gracious self-humiliation of the King. Only by ascending the cross could the Messiah ascend the throne of His mediatorial glory. It is the only way He could subdue human hearts and become the Lord of people’s affections as well as of their destinies. Many in the church do not understand these blessed truths, even at this late date in history. It should not surprise us, then, if these truths were hidden from the eyes of the first disciples for a while! Let us not rebuke them for the veil that was over their faces. Rather, let us make sure the same veil is not over our own.

Peter’s Rebuke

On this occasion, as at Caesarea Philippi, the Twelve found Peter to be an eloquent and energetic interpreter of their feelings. His actions and speech at this time were absolutely characteristic of him. He took Jesus (we are told) - perhaps he laid hold of Him by grabbing His
hand or His clothing - and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You” (Mt. 16:22). What a strange mixture of good and evil is this man! His language is controlled by his intense love; he cannot stand the thought of any harm coming to his Lord. Yet he is so irreverent and disrespectful toward Him whom he has just acknowledged to be the Christ, the Son of the living God! He is so pushy; he contradicts Jesus and dominates Him. In essence, he tries to bully his Master into getting rid of His thoughts about gloomy warnings of some evil that is coming! Truly, he needs to be chastised to put him in his place and to rip out of his character three bad elements: (1) presumption, (2) being too free and intimate in his counsel with Him, and (3) self-will.

It was a good thing for Peter that he had a Master who, in His faithful love, did not spare the rod when it was needed. Jesus determined that it was needed now. Therefore, He administered a severe rebuke, no less remarkable than the warm, approving praise He offered at Caesarea Philippi. He turned around to His offending disciple and sternly said, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's” (Mt. 16:23). This same disciple spoke by the inspiration of Heaven on the previous occasion; now he is represented as speaking by the inspiration of mere flesh and blood - of mere natural affection for his Lord. This is the animal instinct of self-preservation. He was thinking of self-interest only, not of duty. The same man that Christ had called a Rock - strong in faith, and suitable to be a cornerstone in the spiritual building - is here called an offense, a stumbling-block lying in his Master's path. Peter, who nobly confessed that fundamental truth by the faith whereby the church would be able to defy the gates of hell, appears here in the same league with the powers of darkness. He is the unconscious mouthpiece of Satan the tempter. “Get behind Me, Satan!” What a letdown for Peter! Just yesterday he had received the promise of the power of the keys! How suddenly has the beginner church dignitary fallen into the condemnation of the devil! He was probably filled with pride or vanity.

This unforgettable rebuke seems to be mercilessly severe. Yet, when we think about it, we feel that it was well-deserved. Christ's language on this occasion needs no apology. Maybe it would have if He had just become excited and over-reacted. Or, maybe so if He was thinking in His heart the same thing Peter was saying. Even the harsh word - Satan - which is the most stinging part of the rebuke, was used appropriately. It describes exactly the character of the advice that was given by Simon. That advice was essentially this: “Do whatever it takes to save yourself. Sacrifice duty to self-interest, the cause of God to personal convenience.” This is advice that is truly Satanic in principle and tendency! For the whole goal of Satanic policy is to get self-interest recognized as the chief end of man. Satan's temptations aim at nothing worse than this. Satan is called the Prince of this world, because self-interest rules the world. He is called the accuser of the brethren, because he does not believe that even the sons of God have any higher motive.
He is a skeptic. And his skepticism is made up of bold, scornful unbelief in the reality of any ultimate goals except personal advantage. “Does Job, or even Jesus, serve God for nothing? Self-sacrifice, suffering for righteousness’ sake, faithfulness to the truth until death - it is all romance and youthful sentimentalism, or hypocrisy and hollow jargon. There is absolutely no such thing as surrendering the lower life for the higher. All people are selfish at heart and have their price. Some may hold out longer than others but, when pushed to the limit, every person will prefer his own things to the things of God. A man will give all that he has for his life. His moral integrity and his piety are not exempt.” This is Satan’s creed.

The suggestion that was made by Peter is identical in principle with that made by Satan himself to Jesus in the temptations in the wilderness. In this case, Peter was Satan’s unconscious tool. In essence, the tempter had said to Jesus: “If You are the Son of God, use Your power for Your own benefit. You are hungry. Make bread for Yourself out of the stones. If You are the Son of God, be presumptuous about Your privilege as the favorite of Heaven. Cast Yourself down from this high place. You can confidently count on being protected from all harm, even where other people would be allowed to suffer the consequences of their foolishness. What better use can You make of Your divine powers and privileges than to promote Your own advantage and glory?” Peter’s feelings at the present time seem to have been much the same: “If You are the Son of God, why should You suffer a horrible, violent death? You have the power to save Yourself from this kind of fate. Surely You will not hesitate to use it!” Peter was, in fact, an unconscious instrument employed by Satan to subject Jesus to a second temptation - very similar to the earlier one in the desert of Judea. It was the god of this world that was at work in both cases. Satan is accustomed to finding people who prefer safety to righteousness. Therefore, he could not believe that he would not find any of this spirit in the Son of God. So he came again and again seeking an opening in His armor through which he might shoot his fiery darts. Satan would not renounce hope until his intended victim hung on the cross, apparently conquered by the world. In reality, Jesus was the conqueror of both the world and its lord.

Remember that Jesus was addressing a beloved disciple. The severe language spoken by Jesus on this occasion shows in a pointed way that He literally had a holy hatred for everything that smacked of self-seeking. “Save Yourself,” counsels Simon Peter. “Get behind Me, Satan,” replies Simon’s Lord. Truly Christ was not one who pleased Himself. Though He was a Son, He would learn obedience by the things which He had to suffer (cf. Hebrews 5:8). And by thinking in this way, He proved Himself to be the Son and won from His Father the approving voice: “Thou art my beloved Son, in Thee I am well pleased.” It was Heaven’s reply to the voice from hell counseling Him to pursue a course of self-pleasing. Persevering with this thinking pattern, Jesus was eventually lifted up on the cross and so became the Author of eternal salvation for all of those who obey Him. Blessed be His name - now and forevermore - who so humbled Himself, and became obedient as far as death!