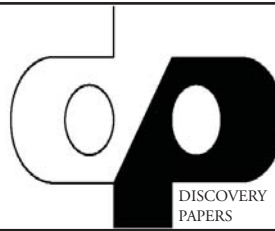


TO END ALL SUFFERING

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Liberace, one of the most popular pianists of his day, removed suffering from the music he played. One could truly say, because of his light and frothy touch, that he tickled the ivory. “My whole trick is to keep the tune well out in front,” he said. “If I play Tchaikovsky, I play his melodies and skip his spiritual struggles. Naturally I condense. I have to know just how many notes my audience will stand for. If there’s time left over, I fill in with a lot of runs up and down the keyboard.”¹

Liberace did with his music what many of us would like to do with life: skip the hard parts. Sooner or later, though, despite our best efforts to avoid it, suffering pays us a visit. In Mark 10:32-45, Jesus tells his followers that they can expect to suffer if they want to follow him. Why suffering?

Mark 10:32-45:

³²They were on the road going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking on ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were fearful. And again He took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen to Him, ³³saying, “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 hand Him over to the Gentiles. ³⁴They will mock Him and spit on Him, and scourge Him and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again.

³⁵James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus, saying, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You.” ³⁶And He said to them, “What do you want Me to do for you?” ³⁷They said to Him, “Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory. ³⁸But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” ³⁹They 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. ⁴⁰But 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.”

⁴¹Hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John. ⁴²Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. ⁴³But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not

come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”²

Jesus again predicts his sufferings

After reaching Caesarea Philippi, the northernmost point of their travels, Jesus and his disciples journeyed south, through the region of Galilee, to the region of Judea (Mark 8:27, 10:1). Then Jesus set out on a journey (Mark 10:17). Although the destination of Jesus’ journey could have been discerned from earlier descriptions, Mark now brings it clearly into view: Jerusalem, the political, spiritual, and emotional center of Israel.³

For the third time, Jesus tells his twelve disciples of his destiny as the Son of Man. In the vision of the prophet Daniel, the Son of Man, a figure who represents God’s people, ascends above earthly beasts, which represent the kingdoms of the world, and receives an everlasting kingdom (Daniel 7:13-14). Although Daniel 7:25 implied that the Son of Man would suffer, Jesus is more specific—and more expansive than he was in his earlier predictions.

He specifies the location of his sufferings, which makes the journey to Jerusalem all the more poignant. He also adds that the Jewish leaders will hand him over to Gentiles, who will ridicule him and kill him. What must the disciples be thinking? They believe Jesus is the Christ, at least at this point, but the Christ, in conventional Jewish thought, was supposed to be enthroned in Jerusalem, vanquish the Gentiles, and restore Israel to its former glory. For Jewish leaders to not only reject Jesus as the Christ but also to deliver him to their enemies for mocking and execution means they hold him in extreme contempt. Jesus, by all appearances, will be powerless before enemies he is supposed to win over or defeat if he’s the Christ. What a way to wreck a pilgrimage!

What gives? If we listen to Jesus with Hebrew Scriptures playing in the background, we realize that Jesus not only saw himself as Daniel’s Son of Man but also as Isaiah’s Servant of the Lord. The prophet Isaiah predicted that the Servant would suffer for Israel in order to restore Israel. The Servant would be ridiculed, forsaken, and cut off from the land of the living (Isaiah 50:6; 53:3, 5, 8). However, just as the Son of Man would ascend to the Ancient of Days, the Servant would be vindicated in some way (Isaiah 50:7, 53:10-12). So, Jesus says, as in his earlier predictions, the Son of Man will rise three days later.

Jesus’ journey, leading his followers to Jerusalem, awakens the hoped-for return from exile, which the prophets likened to a new exodus. Isaiah wrote of the “ransomed of the Lord” coming to Zion with joyful shouting on the “Highway of Holiness” (Isaiah 35:8, 10). Although the Israelites had long since returned from Babylonian captivity, as long as they were dominated by a foreign kingdom, they still considered themselves an exiled people. For the disciples, the journey to Jerusalem inspires great expecta-

tions, but Jesus' prediction of suffering hangs like a dark cloud over their heads.

One of these days

Don't we, like the disciples, harbor hopes that one day everything will fall in place? The words "one of these days" evoke such hopes. Dozens of popular songs, tapping into the deep human longing for a better life, employ those words. My favorite remains the original. The old actor, Walter Brennan, stutters his way through "Old Rivers," singing, "One of these days I'm gonna climb that mountain / Walk up there among them clouds / Where the cotton's high and the corn's a-growin' / And there ain't no fields to plow."⁴

Then, as if on cue, the angels start singing, and we discover Jesus, or we discover him in a new way. Maybe we also find a few special people, or one special person, and we set out for the city of dreams. We hope finally to triumph over our difficulties. As if by magic, everything seems to be falling in place.

Not so fast, Jesus says. Through the scriptures, he reminds us repeatedly of what he endured and he tells us what we must endure if we want to follow him. In Jerusalem, the place where everything was supposed to come together, he suffered many things. The scriptures tell us that suffering—both Jesus' suffering and our suffering as his followers—is part of the restoration story. Suffering is part of a great story, isn't it? Jesus inspires great expectations, and rightly so, but he also tells us that we can expect to have our expectations thwarted.

Madeleine L'Engle, in her poem *Act III, Scene ii*, writes:

*Someone has altered the script.
My lines have been changed.
The other actors are shifting roles.
They don't come on when they're expected to,
and they don't say the lines I've written
And I'm being upstaged
I thought I was writing this play
with a rather nice role for myself,
small, but juicy
and some excellent lines.
But nobody gives my cues
and the scenery has been replaced
I don't recognize the new sets.
This isn't the script I was writing
I don't understand this play at all.⁵*

Despite Jesus' predictions, two of his disciples have been working on their own script, with some juicy roles for themselves.

Two disciples approach Jesus

The disciples hope that their journey to Jerusalem will result in the enthronement of Jesus as the king of Israel. Having seen Jesus grant the requests of strangers, James and John approach him with a request of their own. If Jesus is going to enjoy messianic glory, then James and John hope that they're in line for seats of honor in the kingdom, right next to him (1 Kings 2:19, Psalm 110:1). After all, Jesus had already invited the two of them, along with Peter, to join him on a mountain for what turned out to be the transfiguration, a sort of sneak preview of his messianic destiny (Mark 9:2-8). And Peter may have weakened his position by sticking his foot in his mouth one too many times (Mark 8:33, 9:28-31).⁶

As readers, we're shocked by the request, because Jesus has just predicted, for the third time, his suffering and death. Weren't James and John listening? Listening, yes. Understanding, no. We're left to assume that they misinterpreted Jesus, hearing what they wanted to hear and screening out the rest. James and John were among Jesus' first followers (Mark 1:19). They figure that they should be first in line when Jesus assumes his throne. Each is like a political operative who attaches himself to a candidate with hopes of receiving a plum appointment after the election. Or, each is like the first employees at a startup who hope to profit when the company goes public. They're acting more like cronies of Herod, who threw a bash in his honor literally for his "great" and "first" and beheaded John the Baptist. Jesus, on the other hand, calls his disciples to be last instead of first and to serve if they want to be great (Mark 6:21).

James and John not only don't know what Jesus is saying, they also don't even know what they're asking. Jesus now depicts the destiny he predicted for himself with the metaphors of drinking and baptism. In the Hebrew Scriptures, drinking and drowning imagery was used in connection with God's judgment and with suffering (Psalm 75:8, Isaiah 51:17-23, Job 9:31 Lamentations 4:21, Job 9:31, Isaiah 43:2). The wickedness of Israel was drawing down God's judgment, and Jesus, the king who represents his people, is walking ahead of his followers to receive the judgment that Israel deserves. Earlier, when Jesus went public, he was baptized by John the Baptist, identifying with Israel and committing himself to a vocation that would culminate in another baptism—the baptism of a suffering death. He would be plunged beneath the waters of death. He would swallow the poisonous concoction.

Are James and John ready to share that destiny? Yes, they say, but again, they misunderstand Jesus. Sure, it will be difficult, they surmise, but they also believe they're up for the challenge. They deemed themselves ready to reign with Jesus, one on his right and one on his left. Later, however, when Jesus entered his glory, James and John wanted no part of it. Instead, two insurrectionists were crucified with Jesus, "one on His right and one on His left" (Mark 15:27). No, they would not be able to share the cup and baptism of Jesus, at least not in the days ahead. Nevertheless, the journey of James and John would continue beyond their failure in Jerusalem. In their own way, they would drink the cup and go under the waters. Both would suffer for their loyalty to Jesus. James would be martyred, and John, a "partaker of the tribulation" of Christ, would be sent into exile (Acts 12:1-2, Revelation 1:9).

Jesus says it is not his purview to give seats of honor to anyone. Nevertheless, such places have been and are being prepared, evidently by God (Exodus 23:20, Hebrews 11:16). Who will occupy them remains unknown. Jesus' answer indicates that James and John should not concern themselves with something that he cannot give and which is dependent on God's preparation, not their loyalty. Instead, they should stop jockeying for position and start listening to Jesus.⁷

Expectations of preferential treatment

We hope, perhaps, that one day everything will fall in place. Likewise, we may entertain the belief that we deserve preferential treatment because we have chosen to follow Jesus. If you're following Jesus, you're probably giving up at least something in order to do so, if only a few of the pleasures of this world. After all, a sacrificial commitment that stands the test of time deserves its reward. Some position of prominence might be appropriate.

Didn't we just hear what Jesus said? Don't we know what happened to the Son of Man? He was betrayed, he was condemned, he was handed over, he was mocked and spit on and scourged, and he was killed. Are we willing to drink that cup and go under those waters?

We seem predisposed to misunderstand Jesus. Like the disciples, we hear what we want to hear and screen out the rest. He can hammer us all he wants about the place of suffering, but we still believe we should be spared. It usually comes as a shock when suffering visits us.

When I was a reporter, I interviewed a man who owned a house next to Dry Creek in the northern reaches of the state. A torrential downpour filled the creek to overflowing and flooded the man's house. "Dry Creek," the man scoffed, "that's a laugh!" You think you're safe if you move in next to Dry Creek. But, we're never really safe, are we? Sooner or later, suffering knocks on our door—or pours over the banks of Dry Creek.

A position of prominence: is that what we want? Do we know what we're asking for? What we're asking for, whether we know it or not, is suffering. Are we ready to share the destiny of Jesus and suffer for the sake of the world? Probably not. That's okay, though. James and John weren't ready, either. Our journey continues. If we keep following Jesus, suffering will visit us. When it does, Jesus' words about suffering will make sense. For when we suffer, we need the words of Jesus. When we suffer, we need to know that our suffering is redemptive, not purposeless.

Listen to the words of Jesus now. Even if they make no sense to you and even if you misunderstand him, you will need those words later. When you need them, they'll make sense to you, and you'll understand him.

Contrast the music of Liberace with the literature of Dostoyevsky. Liberace skipped suffering. Journalist Malcolm Muggeridge observed that Dostoyevsky's message—to a world running away from suffering in search of happiness—was to "accept suffering and be redeemed by it."⁸

The greatness of being a servant

The other ten disciples, who have also demonstrated a proclivity to jockey for position, square off against James and John (Mark 9:34). What was twelve becomes ten verses two, just like Israel, which split into ten northern tribes and two southern tribes after the reign of Solomon. Jesus comes from the north and journeys to the south in order to repair the ancient breach and even to tear down the wall between different races. Jesus' twelve disciples, who constitute the beginning of the new Israel, replicate the ancient division within Israel. The future of Israel and humanity hangs in the balance. After all, if Jesus can't unite the twelve, how can the twelve, and those who follow in the footsteps of the twelve, unite the world?

Jesus responds quickly and forcefully. James and John didn't "know" what they were asking. They and the rest of the disciples, however, do "know" Gentile rulers dominate their subjects. In jockeying for position and squaring off against each other, the disciples are fitting themselves for similar leadership. Like so many of those on the outside, they're in danger of becoming no different from those on the inside if they ever get there. Jesus has already predicted that the Gentiles will ridicule him and kill him, but his disciples are starting to look like Gentile rulers.

Jesus tells his disciples to try being servants and slaves if they're concerned with greatness and preeminence. Functionally, as servants and slaves, they should serve. Ontologically, if they become slaves and servants, they lose their concern for status. Neither servants nor slaves were accorded much status, though a servant was more highly valued than a slave. On the one hand, Jesus says, be a servant of the other eleven, and on the other hand, take the additional step of becoming a slave not just for the other eleven but also for everyone. These instructions, if followed, would defuse rivalries, because those who become slaves and servants stop fighting for position and start serving others, even would-be rivals.

Why should they become servants and slaves? Because even the Son of Man, who receives an everlasting kingdom, came not to be served by subjects but to serve like a slave. If the disciples are following Jesus, and he's the Son of Man, and he's come to serve, then following him means becoming a servant and a slave. Jesus isn't simply recommending being a servant; he's also exemplifying it.

Three times Jesus has predicted his suffering as the Son of Man. Finally, he articulates a reason for his suffering, wedding it to being a servant. He will serve by suffering, and his death, like a ransom, will win the release of many from bondage. The word translated "ransom" (*lutron*) is related to the word translated "redemption" (*apolutrōsis*). Historically, redemption for the Jews meant the exodus, when God liberated his people from Egypt, finally by means of the death of Egypt's firstborn and the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, which protected his people from the angel of death.

Not coincidentally, Jesus and his disciples will celebrate the Passover together in Jerusalem, where Jesus will reorient the feast around his body and blood (Mark 14:22-25). By becoming the new Passover lamb, Jesus will effect the long-awaited new exodus. He will lead "the many"—the people of God—to victory not over Rome, as so many expected, but over the far more sinister foes of Satan, sin, and death. He is, after all, the Servant of the Lord,

who would bear “the sin of many” (Isaiah 53:12). The “ransom” in the first exodus was Egypt, a price not nearly steep enough for the new exodus (Isaiah 43:3). Indeed, in the new exodus, the greater and grander return from exile, the “ransomed of the Lord will return,” not to an earthly Zion but to a heavenly Zion—ultimately, the new creation (Isaiah 35:10, Hebrews 12:22). Jesus effects the new exodus not by not by taking lives but by giving his, not by killing enemies but by being killed by them.

Jesus isn’t giving seats of honor; he’s giving his life. He’s giving his life so that the disciples—so that all of us—may enjoy life in the new age, apart from Satan, sin, and death. The disciples, as usual, wanted too little. However, if they’re able to understand that Jesus came to serve them by giving his life as a ransom, they will be motivated to become servants of each other and slaves of everyone. If they follow him, they can expect to serve in the manner of their master: by giving and suffering, drinking the cup and going under the waters.

What being a servant accomplishes

So, why suffering? How is suffering part of the restoration story? How is suffering redemptive?

First, suffering orients us away from our kingdoms and toward the kingdom of God. When Dry Creek destroys your house, you might come to the conclusion that wood, hay, and stubble aren’t so important after all. You might come to the conclusion that what really matters is serving the purposes of the kingdom of God. And how do you serve those purposes? By becoming a servant.

When we jockey for position and square off against each other in the church, we fail to differentiate ourselves from a world that needs a better picture of human community. To give the world that picture, Jesus tells us to lose our concern for status and serve one another, even would-be rivals. Serving rivals defuses rivalries. Jesus unites his followers, not least by commanding us to serve one another, not so that we might become one big, happy family but so that we, as his family, might become “the slave of all”—so that we might lose our concern for status in the world and that we might serve the world.

Second, suffering not only orients us toward the kingdom of God, it also goes hand in hand with serving each other and serving the world. What happens when you serve? You become aware of the sufferings of those you serve. To some extent, you share those sufferings. To a greater extent, you may even draw those sufferings onto yourself, especially if those you attempt to serve reject you. As followers of Jesus, we serve the world, even if the world misunderstands us. In one way or another, if you become a servant, you will suffer, and God in his severe mercy will see to it that you suffer in one way or another. “Indeed,” says the Apostle Paul, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). Suffering validates the service. Those willing to suffer for serving others demonstrate the value they attach to their service.

What are we accomplishing through our suffering service? A lot more than triumphing over our difficulties. By serving one another and the world, we are triumphing over the Big Three: Satan, sin, and death. We are, in the footsteps of Jesus and by the power of the Spirit, contributing

to the establishment of the kingdom of God in the new creation, where the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14). We share and bear the pain of the world and bring suffering to an end by serving and suffering. Thus, we participate in the sufferings of Christ and “fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions,” implementing by the power of the Spirit the victory of the cross and the resurrection (Romans 8:17, Philippians 3:10, Colossians 1:24). How do we end all suffering? By being plunged into it. By swallowing it.

First, suffering orients us toward the kingdom of God. Second, suffering establishes the kingdom of God.

We want too little, don’t we? “One of these days,” sings Imani Coppola, “I’m gonna be happy.” “One of these days,” sings Michelle Branch, “I won’t be afraid of staying with you.” “One of these days,” sings Tim McGraw, “I’m gonna love me.” “One of these days,” sings Pink Floyd, “I’m going to cut you into little pieces.” Not horrible lyrics, with the possible exception of the last one. Not great lyrics, either. They convey the hope for triumph over difficulties, for everything to fall in place. They want something, but they don’t want enough. We want something, but we don’t want enough. Therefore, God at times thwarts our expectations so that we might become servants who serve a greater purpose: the establishment of the kingdom of God—that is, the establishment of God’s healing, loving rule on earth.

The devastating fire at Point Reyes National Seashore in 1995 had a redemptive effect. The flames melted resin of the Bishop pine cones, spewing out thousands of seeds. In the aftermath, a park official observed that “it looked like someone was out there with a cup” dispersing seeds on the ground.⁹ We serve and we suffer, and in ways beyond our imagining, we’re spewing out the seeds that will bear fruit—in this world, yes, but even more so in the new creation.

Jesus both motivates us and shows us the way. He came not to be served by us but to serve us by giving his life to win our freedom from Satan, sin, and death. In response, we serve in the same manner: by serving each other and serving the world, by accepting the suffering that comes with such service, by drinking the cup and going under the waters.

The ransomed of the Lord will return

The little suffering that I have endured has oriented me toward the kingdom of God: it has motivated me to serve my purposes less and God’s purposes more. What I didn’t know, when I first encountered suffering as a follower of Jesus, was that my suffering was contributing to the establishment of the kingdom of God. Now that I’m more biblically informed, I can’t say—nor do I think I should say—that I’m looking forward to more suffering. Nevertheless, I think I’m more prepared to understand it when it comes, which it surely will as I continue following Jesus.

One of these days, our suffering will be complete. It will have done its complete work. One of these days, the kingdom of God will have come—on earth as it is in heaven. One of these days, the ransomed of the Lord will return,

not to the Jerusalem of yesterday or today, but to the city of dreams, the heavenly Zion, the new Jerusalem. Until then, work out what it means for you to be a servant in your home, in your neighborhood, in your workplace, in your school, in your church—in your world.

NOTES

¹ Quoted in *William Barclay, A Spiritual Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 100.

² Literary structure:

A Jesus took the twelve disciples aside (32)

B Son of Man to be “delivered” (*paradidōmi*) / they will “hand Him over” (*paradidōmi*) (33-34)

A’ Two disciples came up to Jesus (35)

B’ Disciples: “Grant [*didōmi*] that we may sit” / Jesus: “not mine to give [*didōmi*]” (36-40)

A” Jesus called disciples to himself (41-42)

B” Son of Man came to “give” (*didōmi*) his life (43-45)

³ This has all the earmarks of a pilgrimage, especially inasmuch as Mark later reports that Jesus and his disciples arrive in Jerusalem in time for the Passover, a national feast (Psalm 122:4, Mark 14:1). As earlier in Mark, Jesus inspires both amazement and fear. Cause for both responses will only intensify once they enter the gates of Jerusalem.

⁴ Cliff Crofford, “Old Rivers” (1962).

⁵ Madeleine L’Engle, *Act III, Scene ii*.

⁶ Herod, the partially Jewish tetrarch who ruled Galilee and Peraea and fancied himself as king of the Jews, promised to give a dancing girl whatever she asked for. What she asked for, and what Herod felt obliged to give her, was the head of John the Baptist (Mark 6:22-24). By contrast, Jesus, who is shaping up to be the true king of the Jews, asks his disciples what they want but promises nothing. They don’t ask for anyone’s head, but neither is their request informed by the way of the Lord.

⁷ If God prepares seats of honor, how does he do it? In light of Jesus’ question about whether James and John can drink his cup and share in his baptism, suffering may have something to do with it. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul urges the Corinthians to bestow “more abundant honor” on those who “seem to be weaker,” who are likely to be considered “less honorable” and “less presentable.” In fact, he says, God has arranged things in order to “give more abundant honor” to such people (1 Corinthians 12:22-25). In like manner, Jesus says, “But many who are first will be last, and the last, first.” When seats of honor are passed out, we’re likely to be in for a few surprises.

⁸ Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky* (Farmington, Penn.: Plough Publishing House, 1988), 1.

⁹ *San Francisco Examiner* (December 3, 1995), A1.