

An invitation to Life Mark 8:27-9:1

Life: Worth more than all.

I don't know if you were paying attention to the justification used by some medical ethicists to the curtailing of our rights during the pandemic.

When people complained about the loss of rights to free movement, to free association, to pursue their livelihood without vaccination – serious losses, it was replied that these rights did not outweigh the rights of the vulnerable, or of the whole community, to have their lives protected.

The argument was simple – if you do not have life, all those other rights are useless. Without life there can be no association, no movement, no work. The enjoyment of all other rights is dependent on having life in the first place, and therefore the protection of the lives of all is the best way and the only way to preserve the possibility of those other rights for all.

If you don't have life – you have nothing,

Now, you may or may not have been persuaded by that argument at the time

But Jesus is making the same point about the importance of life, that having life is worth more than all, that keeping your life has to be the priority, in verses 35-36 of our passage.

³⁶ For what does it benefit someone to gain the whole world and yet lose his life? ³⁷ What can anyone give in exchange for his life

And he makes that point in the context of saying that

He, and He alone can give this life, and by life here he is speaking of eternal life, the life of the age to come –

He, and He alone, can deliver life, on His terms, and in His way.

And as possessing this life is precious, the life of the age to come – which will never know weakness, or grief, or pain, or death

And as at the least it would appear Jesus has been a very influential figure in history

Hope you will listen to Him this evening, hear Him out

More, you will see that He can be believed, even as He invites us to find life by losing our lives in following Him

Start with His general point – life is worth more than all.

Jesus asks us two questions

³⁶ For what does it benefit someone to gain the whole world and yet lose his life? ³⁷ What can anyone give in exchange for his life

There is no benefit is there, whatever your whole world is, to have it and not have life

You amass a billion dollars – and die – it will do you know good.

You get sole power over a family, a company, a nation – and die – there is no gain

You find the perfect partner, and you marry and set up home, and have great kids – and you die – where's the benefit

You work hard to get your life just as you want it – the good friends, the creative self-expression, the wonderful holidays – and you die – there is no enjoyment, no fulfillment

There is no enjoyment of any of these things you might desire if you have no life

And no matter what you gain at the cost of your life, you will not be able to use it to get your life back

³⁷ *What can anyone give in exchange for his life*

Sometimes people fantasize about that.

The magician or scientist who produces the elixir of eternal youth at great cost

But it is just fantasy

Money, fame, knowledge of this world, power, human love

None of these will prevent you from dying or bring you back from the grave

Death is a discontinuity

Nothing in this material world, nothing you might possess or attain, can reach beyond the grave, can give you life

Without life – nothing, and once lost you have no way of getting life back

To have life, to keep your life, that is worth everything else for it is the foundation of enjoying everything else

And Jesus asks these questions in the context of saying He can give life, will give life, - and it becomes clear that this life is life beyond the death that will come to us all, the undying life of the age to come

That HE will give this life to those who respond to what at first seems a very uninviting invitation that HE makes to all, the crowd as well as His disciples

The uninviting invitation

Mark 8: ³⁴ *Calling the crowd along with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it*

To follow after is to become His disciple, to be included amongst those who are loyal to Him and so share in His reign, His victory as the Christ

And the Lord Jesus says this following can only begin where two things happen, we can only become His disciples where we deny ourselves and take up our cross

We deny ourselves

It is not deny yourself this or that – a good bed, regular meals if you were there in person; overseas holidays or an opera subscription, or even watching r rated movies or drinking too much

No, it is bigger than that

To deny yourself is to give up the right to run your life your own way

To give up being accountable only to yourself for the way you live, giving up being the boss so that the Lord Jesus becomes the boss, the one with the right to direct you in every aspect of your life

This idea is inherent in the idea of following

That would be obvious to the first hearers.

Jesus is in front of them. To follow was to let Jesus walking ahead of you decide where you go, whether you turn left or right at the next intersection, whether you walk for 4 or ten hours, whether and where you stop for meals, where you sleep at night

It was letting Jesus run your life, set your priorities, determine how you spend your time

And that is true for us today, even though Jesus is not standing there in front of you.

To follow is to commit yourself to living by Jesus' teaching, to have Him run your life by His word, where His word sets your priorities, determines for example how you spend your time, what you pursue, how you engage in relationships

To follow is to be amongst those who are taught to do all that Jesus has taught, and who, when they come to a fork in the road on their journey through life, ask what direction the Lord Jesus teaches them to choose and then take that one.

So say you find yourself attracted to someone who is not yet a Christian. You have to decide whether and in what manner the relationship will proceed. If you are directed by the word of the Lord Jesus, You will be clear with yourself and the other person that the relationship can only have a future if they become a Christian, for the Lord says we can marry only in the Lord.

Or say you are asked to do something at work that you know is not right – as I once was by one of my bosses. You are at a fork in the road – do it and keep your job, or refuse to be dishonest and lose your job. A follower of Jesus knows the Lord suffered for doing right and calls us to do the same, and won't be dishonest come what may.

Following Jesus has, says our Lord, a definite beginning. You don't drift into it.

You start by denying yourself, saying no to being boss of your life any more, and yes to listening to and obeying Jesus

And Jesus says you have to do that knowing the destination that following Him will bring you to.

Those who follow, shockingly, must take up their cross as they step out on the path after Him.

What do you hear when you hear that?

Does a shudder of horror run through you? Or are you thinking you just have to shoulder some difficult burden – like being chaste while you are single, or keeping on trying to honour difficult parents – tough, but not deadly.

That may be involved in your following, but again Jesus is calling for more.

The cross was not a metaphor for the first hearers.

Crucifixion was part of the way Romans maintained their rule and control over conquered peoples, and the Jews were familiar with crosses for they were displayed in public places for maximum deterrent effect.

Criminals and rebels who were sentenced to crucifixion were made to carry the cross beam to the place of their execution.

Jesus is saying to His first hearers that to follow you must be willing to live as someone who knows they are already condemned. When you took up the cross you knew a good reputation, comfort, safety, a future in this life – were all being left behind.

You start thinking loyalty to Jesus is more important than preserving your own life.

So when you hear the Lord Jesus call you to take up your cross at the very outset of your following – we have to hear Jesus calling us to walk away from a good reputation – to be prepared to be thought of as shameful, stupid, losers, for following Jesu

To walk away from safety, from comfort, from making our own future in this life, for the sake of following Jesus

And having begun we must keep on following – the second 'following' has a continuous sense, there is no turning back, you never get to put down that cross in this life

Every day says Jesus, my disciple must put his or her feet in the dust of the road he travels ahead of us

Every day we must keep listening to and doing all Jesus teaches

What an invitation

Mark 8: ³⁴ *Calling the crowd along with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it*

You can't accuse Jesus of trying to con people into following Him by promising an easy life, comfort, wealth, fame

It is not an attractive invitation is it.

Why would anyone respond? And who does Jesus think He is to make such a demand of people, of you and I?

Jesus answers both questions.

Firstly, why respond, why deny yourself and take up your cross to follow Him

³⁵ *For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it*

Jesus is clear. Following Him is the only way to life, the life of the age to come, life death cannot touch

If you choose not to follow, to save your life by keeping control and not taking up the cross – well, you will lose life

Those who hear what He says and turn away saying – No, it is all too hard, too hard to live doing all that the Lord Jesus has taught. I want to keep being able to make my choices where the only person I please is myself. I want to have the life I choose, and there are other things I desire more than being a faithful disciple of Jesus.

The quiet life with the family

The rewarding job that requires me to make an idol of my career, give it all my time and energy

The full expression of my sexuality

A life lived pursuing experiences that enrich and fulfil me

Jesus says you also will lose your life

In trying to preserve and protect the life you desire, in trying to avoid suffering and death for Jesus' sake,

Whether that is the physical suffering and death that so many of Jesus' followers have faced over the centuries and still face in many parts of the world

Or the suffering of denied desire, or frustrated advancement, or social exclusion

In trying to protect and preserve the life you desire, you will lose life. Your end will be eternal death, not life

but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it

Dying for my sake, for faithfulness to me, you will live – live in the new heaven and earth

Notice it is for my sake and the gospel

Christ and His gospel are inseparable

You cannot be loyal to one but not the other, for Christ comes to us in His gospel – you know Him nowhere else, and His gospel brings us to and makes us depend on Christ

That gospel is the gospel Jesus proclaimed [Mark 1:14-15], the gospel that proclaims God's reign has come in the presence of Jesus for He is God's King

And it is the same gospel the apostles' preach, for in proclaiming that the Lord Jesus has died for our sins and risen again they are also proclaiming that the Lord Jesus reigns with all authority, that HE is the King of God's Kingdom

Jesus is saying that you will never be a loser for being loyal to Him and His gospel

Even if it costs you everything, you will be repaid with more

Even if you lose, not just reputation, security, your cherished ambition – but your life in this life – you will have a life you can never lose

A life at peace with God enjoying all His bounty, a life without grief and pain, weakness and failure, a life without death.

But how can He claim that?

A living man, standing before them with dust on his feet

How can He say that following Him is worth everything because He alone gives the life death cannot take away from us?

How can any man say that and expect to be believed?

No human has ever freed themselves from death. How can Jesus expect His first hearers, or us, to think He can overcome death for Himself, let alone give life beyond the death of this life to those who follow Him?

Feel the weight of what He is saying.

I and I alone can give deathless life, a life worth giving up your life for now, a life beyond losing your life

How can Jesus say this? Who does He think He is?

Who does He think He is? V. 38 tells us. He believes He will be the judge on the last day.

Mark 8: ³⁸ *For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."*

Daniel 7: ¹³ I continued watching in the night visions,

*and suddenly one like a son of man
was coming with the clouds of heaven.*

*He approached the Ancient of Days
and was escorted before him.*

*¹⁴ He was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
so that those of every people,
nation, and language
should serve him.*

*His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that will not pass away,
and his kingdom is one
that will not be destroyed.*

Jesus says His words are the words of the glorious Son of Man, that is the one God revealed in Daniel 7, the one to whom God has entrusted the rule over all peoples and nations, the one whose rule and kingdom death will not be able to end

*His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that will not pass away,
and his kingdom is one
that will not be destroyed.*

The glorious son of man who as God's ruler over all will execute the judgement of God His Father, when His reign is revealed in glory and might, in overwhelming power that none can resist

On that day HE says those who are ashamed of Him and His words

That is, they don't want to be associated with or identified with Jesus, have wanted to distance themselves from Jesus

And have shown that by separating themselves from what He says about Himself and how HE says His followers are to live

Those who Have qualified and modified His teaching until it is more acceptable, or have disowned and abandoned it completely

The Son of Man says He will be ashamed of such people, not want to know them, be associated with them, when He comes in glory to gather His people into eternal life and cast the wicked into the eternal darkness

Hear that, for there is a lot of temptation to be ashamed of Jesus and His words in what our Lord calls 'a wicked and adulterous generation'

A wicked and adulterous generation describe a self willed people who want to pursue what pleases them and not what pleases God, a people who want to give the thanks and praise and obedience due to their Creator to created things

It is a phrase that describes our times, where people resent being told how God would have them live, and want to give their loyalty, put their faith in, themselves, their own power and knowledge and wealth, or in other gods

A generation where people want us to be ashamed, demand that we be ashamed, of, for example, Jesus' claim to be the only Saviour, or of the truth that God will judge all by His standards, not ours, and His judgment is good and final, or that the good gift of sex is only to be used in the marriage of a man and a woman and God condemns all sex outside marriage, or that thanks and praise is owed to the one Creator God, that you cannot make yourself good enough for God, that loyalty to Jesus is more important than loyalty to state or family

The pressure is there – you have probably felt it

Our Lord says that if we are now ashamed of Him and His words

Then on that day – He will be ashamed of us

Not want to know us, not be willing to associate with us, not recognize us as His own before the Father, keep us at an eternal distance from Himself

Jesus can say that being faithful to Him, giving up all for Him, is the way to life because

He knows He is the glorious Son of Man, the judge of all, and it is in His power to welcome into His eternal Kingdom

Or to turn away to eternal death those who have no place in His presence because He and His words had no place in their presence

That tells us why Jesus thinks He can deliver, but should we trust that He can, should we believe Him?

Why should we share Jesus' view of Himself

What can assure us of Jesus' truthfulness

Let us know He is not crazy, or a manipulative liar getting off on a power trip with His demands on the loyalty of His hearers

What could assure His hearers?

Jesus promises a confirmatory sign

Mark 9 Then he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God come in power."

Some, before they die, will have a foretaste of Jesus' mighty reign, see the kingdom of God come with power. That's how they could know Jesus was speaking the truth

What does it mean for some to 'see the kingdom of God, the reign of God, come in power'

To answer that we need to go back to the beginning of our passage, to Jesus' commitment to be the Christ no one expected or wanted, the Christ who would do God's, not humans', will, the Christ who will die at the hands of His enemies.

Remember, Peter has just confessed v. 29, on the basis of the things they had witnessed, that Jesus is the Christ.

That is, that HE was God's promised King, The promised descendant of David

the one who would establish an eternal reign – one death would not end; one who would rule over all, so Israel need never fear their enemies, never be oppressed again; the one who would reign with justice and righteousness – and so there lives would be ordered, know prosperity and peace

The one through whom God achieves His saving purposes in the world

That was a high water mark in the disciples' understanding, and perhaps they expected Jesus to then start talking to them about how they could seize power and throw out the corrupt Jewish rulers and the Romans, get Him on the throne of David

But look what He starts talking about

Mark 8: ³¹ Then he began to teach them that it was necessary for the Son of Man to suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and rise after three days.

He starts talking about – defeat, humiliation. Not as a possibility if things don't work out well.

But as a necessity – 'it was necessary'

Sure, he also spoke of rising after three days, but not understanding what was involved that doesn't seem to be any consolation to Peter

Peter can hardly believe His ears.

How can Jesus indulge in this kind of defeatist, crazy talk

³² He spoke openly about this. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

And we know from Matthew the kind of thing Peter said

Matthew 16: ²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, "Oh no, Lord! This will never happen to you!"

What you have described is just impossible. You seem to have entirely the wrong idea of the work of the Christ, of the outcome of His coming

It is victory, honour and life, the crushing of enemies,

It might, like David, involve a period of difficulty, of opposition, but there will be triumph in the end – not death

Peter seems to have forgotten that Jesus had just warned them of the leaven of the Pharisees, the danger of thinking we could know better than God how God should act and what He should approve.

³³ *But turning around and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! You are not thinking about God's concerns but human concerns."*

Having spoken publicly, Peter has to be rebuked publicly.

His rejection of what Jesus has said means HE is acting like Satan, the tempter, trying to deflect Jesus from the path of obedience to the Father, as Satan had at His temptation at the beginning of His ministry

His thinking, says Jesus, is all too human. Peter is articulating the way people would bring about victory over their enemies, establish peace on earth – by avoiding suffering, and making your enemies suffer; humiliating your opponents, not being humiliated in defeat yourself.

But God's plan is so much greater, bigger. As He says in Isaiah

Isaiah 55:⁸ "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways."

This is the LORD's declaration.

⁹ *"For as heaven is higher than earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

God is about establishing the promised eternal reign of the Christ

And for that, death must be defeated, and how could that be known unless someone dies and then lives in the body in which they had died

And for people to live at peace with God in that eternal reign, sin, the offence of our rebellion against God, must be dealt with

Peter has not got a clue about what God is doing

But Jesus knows what is involved in God fulfilling His saving purpose – His death in Jerusalem as the sacrifice that deals with our sin and ransoms His people from their debt to God's law [Mark 10:45], His death as the rejected King who in His obedient death defeats His enemies, breaks the power of the One who has the power of death [Heb. 2:14-15], and rises with authority over all, authority over death itself

Jesus knows what God is doing, and is preparing His followers for that time

And Jesus will be faithful to the Father's will, to be His Christ, not the people's Christ

And the Lord Jesus was confident, as the loved Son of the Father, of the fulfilment of the Father's promises and purposes

ON the third day, which is the same as 'after three days, He tells them He will rise

And that confidence is expressed in His promise that there would be a witness to His being the glorious Son of Man to whom the eternal kingdom and judgement were entrusted, that some would see the Kingdom of God come with power

Mark 9 Then he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God come in power."

Who are the some, and what will they see that will assure them that Jesus is telling the truth when He says He, and He alone, can give the life the death of this life cannot take away to all who follow Him

Some at this point say that Jesus is speaking of the transfiguration that is recorded in the following verses when Peter, James and John see Jesus transfigured before them, his clothes becoming dazzlingly white, and hear God speak from heaven.

It certainly left an impression. Peter could write towards the end of his life that this was a moment where he was an eyewitness of Jesus' majesty

Transfiguration

2 Peter 1: ¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly contrived myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; instead, we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased!" ¹⁸We ourselves heard this voice when it came from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain.

But the transfiguration itself points forward to the fulfilment of Jesus mission in His death, resurrection and ascension [Luke 9:31 'His exodus'], where the kingdom of God, the reign of God, is revealed in power by Jesus being revealed in those events as the eternal King, One who had all authority in heaven and on earth, that is as the glorious Son of Man who rules over all for ever.

This was not seen by all, but it was seen by 'some standing here'. Jesus has been speaking to the crowd and the disciples, and the disciples witnessed His resurrection.

As Paul says, the gospel proclaims Jesus as *appointed to be the powerful Son of God according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead.*

Romans 1: Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures— ³concerning his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who was a descendant of David according to the flesh ⁴and was appointed to be the powerful Son of God according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead.

The resurrection and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, revealing the reign of God in power in the reign of the Lord Jesus which none of His enemies can frustrate or defeat, which death itself has only served to reveal, tells us Jesus was speaking the truth.

He is the One who can give life, the life of the age to come to His forgiven people, life which death, the death of this age, cannot, can never, take away from them

He is The Son of Man who will come in glory to judge the living and the dead, and by whose word our eternal futures will be determined

The Jesus who spoke then to the crowds and the disciples, is the Jesus who is speaking to you now in His gospel word

I hope you know that

And the Lord Jesus, who in love for those who do not deserve His love Himself carried His cross to His execution, there to bear in Himself the judgement our disobedience to God deserves, and who has risen from the grave, triumphant over death which holds all others captive,

The Risen Jesus is offering you life – but only on His terms

Mark 8: ³⁴Calling the crowd along with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. ³⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it

Think about it

He and His gospel are good – for in the gospel of Christ we see that the one with all authority is the one who humbled Himself to graciously give us life, the one who loved us, is the one who did not seize power, did not embrace violence, who was meek and gentle, who came not to judge but to save, who in a world of spin spoke true words we can rely on

Jesus deserves to be loved, to be followed, trusted with all we are

Though it costs us all – it is good to follow Him, to know now His love and forgiveness

And following Him is the only way to a life that the death of this life will not rob us of.

Whatever else you might get in life, might achieve – you will lose it all in death, and it has no power to give you life

Only Jesus who has died and risen has the authority, the power, to give you the life of God's Spirit, the life the death of this world cannot destroy

Jesus is offering you life if you will follow Him

Will you follow?

You can't drift into it

You have to make a decision, and then keep following

I don't know where you stand tonight with the Lord Jesus

Perhaps all this is new to you. You had no idea that Jesus had such conviction about Himself, about His authority and power.

It is different from whatever picture of Jesus you had in your mind

Find out more about Jesus by reading a life of Jesus with a Christian you know, or one of us. Hear Jesus, meet Him in His own words in the words of the eyewitnesses.

Life, eternal life, is too big a thing not to investigate.

Or maybe you have heard Jesus' call before, maybe even think Jesus has risen from the dead, but have never committed to following Him

What is holding you back?

Is it that you are in love with your own rule of your life? You cannot give yourself life.

Or you are in love with some sin?

Your drinking, or illicit sex, or gossip – they won't give you life

Maybe it is fear, fear of what you will lose

A bloke called Jim Elliott said

He or she is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose

It is a famous saying, because Jim Elliott proved he believed it. Following Jesus he wanted all people to hear the gospel and went to the Auca Indians in Ecuador to share the good news with them, and they killed him within days of his contact with him [1956].

But it is also famous because it summarises the reality of giving up all to follow Jesus.

It might seem foolish – to give up a good career, the safety of a predictable life, sinful activities that bring you pleasure in this life, control of your own life – to live by the word of Jesus

But You cannot keep your own life. None of those things will last

But what Jesus, the Lord who has conquered death, gives you, you can never lose, and He calls you in love

Decide to follow Him

Deny yourself – repent, ask Him to forgive you for seeking to run your life without Him, and to be your Lord, your boss. And ask Him to give you His Spirit to let you live as His follower, to give you the power to live a new life, saying no to yourself and yes to Him each day

Or perhaps listening to Jesus' call you realise you have been half hearted, realised that you have been trying to be a follower on your own terms.

You say you are a believer, but you also want to hold on to this or that self willed sin

The delicious gossip

The anxious fearfulness that doesn't trust His word

The protective self love that will not forgive

Jesus only has followers on His terms

Only has followers who will deny themselves and take up their cross

So if you are still trying to negotiate with Jesus, keep some area of your life where His world will not rule – money, or sex, or friendships from which He is excluded

If you were thinking that following Jesus is all about you being fulfilled, and you have a right to be disappointed if life is not working out the way you wanted

You need to repent – confess your sin to Him, and in grief and gratitude turn away from it to live the life He calls you to – whether that is of purity, or confident trust, or forgiving

Hear Jesus and believe Him

³⁵ *For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it*

Or maybe listening you have been convicted of times when you have been ashamed of Jesus words – tried to distance yourself from what HE has said about Himself – that HE is the only way, the Son of the Father, the One who can forgive, or what HE has taught about how we should live – apologised for and not declared the goodness of what Scripture says about sexual expression, or the relation of men and women, or about the reality of judgement

Don't think it isn't serious. How could you think you know better than God, or are more loving than God who has given us His good word in love.

It is serious, but remember Peter found mercy when he repented in tears of denying His Lord

Repent, and ask for forgiveness, and ask for the leaven of the Pharisees – this idea that we can say better than God what is right for God to say – out of your heart

And for the love that would be ashamed to ever be ashamed again of Jesus and His words

And if you know you are a follower, and you live every day denying yourself and following your good Lord – be thankful for His grace that has convicted you of His glory, that He is the glorious Son of Man, and convicted you of the truth of His promise.

Be grateful for His call to follow. It is an invitation to share His death and His life, His humiliation and His glory, His life of faithful obedience as loved children of God now, and loved children who will be transformed to share in His resurrection glory at the last day

And as Jim Elliot knew, it is an invitation to share His mission to seek and save the lost, to bring them to know the life that the death of this life can never take from us

Be grateful, and never be ashamed in this life of the Lord Jesus who took up His cross, or of His gospel that is His power to give life to all who believe