

The Christ

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Date: 14 April 2013

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[0 : 0 0] I like this morning just to spend some time looking at Mark's Gospel chapter 8 and that last section that we read together. I mentioned this on Wednesday evening that I was kind of shaken to the core by a reading that I took from 2 Thessalonians in the Bible one day this week. It is talking about Jesus coming back and we are just a Easter and it has been Easter when we have talked about the death, resurrection, the ascension of Jesus and the reality of him coming back. In 2 Thessalonians it says, this will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.

You will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among those who have believed. This includes you because you have believed in our testimony to you. Now if you do not think that is an absolutely utterly terrifying verse, then you are bonkers because it is. And we recoil from it with all our beings. I recoil from that verse with all my being because we do not want that to be the end. We would love it if the story was for everyone whether they have thought about Jesus or cared about Jesus

Christ or listened to God or prayed about him. In a sense we would wish at some point in the future they get that opportunity to make their peace with God and join him in heaven. But the reality is whether we would like it or not, the reality is that Jesus Christ says we have to respond to him in this life and his gospel and his death and his resurrection and his claims, we respond to them now. That is what he asks us to do. That is the gospel message. And that is really what Jesus is speaking about here in the passage in Mark chapter 8. It is so important, he says, it is so significant. The future is so horrifying to be out of, away from God, separated from God, not having made our peace with God, that it brought Jesus from the comforts and joys and fellowships of heaven into Mary's womb and into the womb of the world to live this life and to die the horrific death on the cross a billion times much worse than we can ever imagine a death to be because it was not just a physical thing, it was a spiritual separation from his father as he was the atoning sacrifice for our sins as he took on God, on himself, as God took on himself the guilt for our rebellion and our sin. So there is this hugely significant thing without which it all crumbles and falls away. It is kind of, it is tippy tapping on a Easter medal with butter cups under our chins if it is not true, if it is just nice thinking for the occasional day when we feel spiritual or religious or not. Why would we bother keeping coming together to worship? Why do we get out of our beds to come and worship and then live our lives for Jesus Christ as Christians? Why do we battle through every single road that we could see today, ballard off to come here? If it does not matter and if it is insignificant because we believe and have come to believe in the person of

Jesus, his outstanding commitment and love to us and our need and our lostness and our sin and his healing and his hope and the future. Because we come, this is right in the middle of Mark's Gospel. It is 16 chapters, this is the kind of end of chapter 8 and it is great really because in a sense it is like God saying or Jesus saying, right this is Mark's Gospel, if you look at Mark chapter 1, Mark is the one who says this is the beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. That is what he is doing, remember he is moving quickly and here right in the middle, it is like the hub in the middle of a bicycle wheel or any wheel really, that this is the core, this is what has been leading up to this point and everything from this point will look back to what Jesus says here in the middle of Mark's Gospel, who he is and what he has come to do. It is hugely significant, hugely important, it is the middle of the Gospel and it beautifully summarises I guess what we looked at over the last three Sundays of Easter. Because remember I mentioned, you may or may not remember that, in Mark's Gospel Jesus mentions three times at different points his death that he would die and in the third

day be raised again. So he mentions I tell the disciples three times to them so that they know and of course they do not really take it in. But he prophesies, he says this is what he has come to do, this is why he has come, it is not an accident, it is not a poor prophet who is misunderstood and nailed to a tree and they make up a story about it so he becomes a saviour, crucified. It is not anything like that, he says this is why I have come, it is just why I am here, I am coming, I am moving towards Jerusalem, I am going to be killed and after three days I am going to rise again. He spoke plainly about this, this is not miracles, it is not fables, it is not parables, it is not story, it is factual and he is telling this plainly to them, Peter takes him aside and rebukes him for being so idiotic in what he says. So this is one of the times that Jesus says exactly what he is going to do, this is why he has come and it is the core of the Gospel and it just is, I kind of hope it is going to cement what we have looked at over the Easter period, the death, the last supper of the death and the resurrection of Jesus. But it is also really solemn and I hope that you will put aside other thoughts for a while. This is the first time you have ever been in church,

I hope it makes sense to you, I hope the Spirit of God works in you, if it does not please come and speak to me afterwards and I will try and make it, make more sense of it. If you have come to church for many years and you have been a Christian for a long time, it remains the core of who we are and what we believe. So do not switch off just because you are a Christian for many years and think, I know this, I have been here before. And if you have come here for a long time and you have never become a Christian, then it is hugely significant that you respond to the message of Jesus and what he says. So we have got a core of the gospel in these words really. And the core of the gospel is what Jesus says himself in verse 31 30, he began to teach him that the Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, the chief priest, the teacher of the law, that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this. So he is pointing forward to the fact that Jesus, God's Son, God in the flesh, God who has come among us, Jesus must come and he must suffer and die. So it is the centrality, he is pointing to the centrality of the cross. The cross is not an afterthought, it is not a mistake.

[8 : 39] It is what Paul says at the beginning of the gospel, what Peter says and he preaches and that is, we believe in Christ and him crucified. It is not just Christ and the bunny rabbit, Easter bunny rabbit, it is not just Christ and Santa Claus, it is not just Christ and it is nice to be a good person, it is Christ and him crucified as central to the message.

If we take that out of the message, we have just got a Mahatma Gandhi figure, a good, you know, amazing kind of individual person. But not God, but this is God who says he comes and God who says he comes and he comes to suffer and to die. What is God doing about my suffering? What does God care about what I am going through? God is far away, he is disinterested. No, God came and suffered and died in our place to deal with our personal separation from the Father and that relational break that sin has meant and the death that goes along with that. And really what Jesus goes on to teach and what this is the core of saying is reminding us that death, our physical death, which we all dread, do we? I dread it. I visited someone this week who is an old person, petrified of dying. Their life has gone. It is all behind them. And the older we get, the more that becomes a reality for us. And what Jesus is reminding us of is death is not a natural part of life, it is a spiritual consequence that focuses on the fact that we are already separated from God in a spiritual way. Our physical death is a consequence of being, as it were, dead to God spiritually, separated from Him because of our rebellion and because of our sin, because of our imperfect beings. He is a perfect, just person. He does love us but He cannot relate to us and be in relationship with us unless the core problem that separates us from Him is dealt with.

And that is what He came to do because we couldn't deal with it. Sorry, we couldn't deal with ourselves so He comes to deal with it. So He says Jesus must suffer and die. That is the core of what we believe. It remains the core. So if we skip about in our lives thinking that it doesn't really matter how we live or that sin is unimportant or that we can stick our fingers up at God and just live our own way, He is saying no, that is not how it is. But I love you, I have done this for you and I want you to respond to it. And look, the passage of time doesn't make any difference. Whether you live alive in AD 1 or AD whatever this is, 2013, however accurate or not, it makes no difference. Makes no difference to our need. The passage of time doesn't make a difference. We don't become more sophisticated and closer to God with the passage of time. We don't learn more secrets of the universe. We don't not die and we don't not have the spiritual condition that Jesus speaks about because before Him and after Him, humanity has the spiritual need that doesn't change. We're very

sophisticated here. We're hugely scientific and knowledgeable but our spiritual condition doesn't change before God. And He goes on to speak about His rejection. You know He spoke plainly that He would be rejected by the elders, the chief priest, the teachers of the law. And He doesn't say here but He was also rejected by the crowd. This is rejection. He's rejected by organized religion. That's always a really important thing for us to remember as we sit here as organized religious people. And maybe sometimes we put our hope in the church or being part of the church or what the church can do for us or what the church has done or maybe we've got hang-ups about the church. Speaking to another person this week who said, our mum will never go back to church because the way they treated her when she was going through a hard time in her life. She would hate the church. So you may like this fact that Jesus was rejected by the church. She said, I can appreciate that. I can understand that. The church stinks. The church sucks. It's just a noun for me and that may be the case. But you can't stand in the name of just before God and say that that's my defence for getting into heaven. Because He says this is always what was going to happen. Organized religion hated Him. They didn't like what Jesus had to say. And the crowd eventually didn't like what Jesus had to say. People constantly say, [13:59] I would believe if Jesus was right there in front of me, if I could touch Him, I could see Him. If He walked the streets, I walked. But He did. But people didn't like it. They don't like God in the flesh because it exposes our need and because there's a challenge that He brings to us. He's rejected. He causes us to face our own mortality, doesn't He?

He causes us to face things that we don't really like to face. So we reject Him. We just rather go and party because that's easier. And I'm happier that way. But, you know, it doesn't change the truth. And He says that our best efforts, our best moralities, our desire just to be inherently good and to try and make our own way isn't going to cut it.

And people don't like that. So they reject Him. And the religious people didn't like Him because He was a challenge to their power and to their authority and to their control of the people. They liked to be in control. Jesus breaks control. He breaks self-control that this desire to be a sovereign over our own lives. He says, I'm Lord. And He breaks that desire to control other people. And then He speaks about His resurrection on the third day having taken and tasted and been brutalised by carrying our failure, by being in a dock in our place, by taking our death, by facing our hell. He's enraised because God's happy.

And He is happy that this is justice being done, that the price has been paid, that things are right with Him and God to all those who will put their trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The victory has been won. This is predicted by Him. It was a battle, but the outcome was never in doubt. Can you see that there's never been an equal battle between good and evil, which Jesus won the last minute, in the last round. He just pipped Satan at the post and the evil. It was never the case. With all the mystery that's involved in that, with all the difficulty that we have with the battle between good and evil and between God facing Satan and why He chose this way and why He didn't do it another way. There was never in doubt, it was never in doubt that He would, He's predicted three times that He would die and be raised again on the third day because He is God. He is God. And God cannot be equaled. Everything else is created, everything else is under Him. There's only one God. Now that blows your mind, it blows my mind. I try not to think about the eternal nature of God too much because my tiny little pea-sized brain begins to smoke because I can't take it in. But it's, what's revealed. The core of the universe is a personal, loving God who has always been and who chose to come down to be the Savior in the way He chose to be because it was the only way because He loved us. That's the Gospel. That's what we believe. He loved us so much that He did what we couldn't do and gave us what we couldn't take. And we know that Satan, his arch enemy but nonetheless now defeated enemy, hates that message, hates that Gospel. He would much rather another Gospel and this is very blunt. I said, no, you get it. No, murder. That's the bell that someone, oh, done, I'll get it. There might be more. I don't know whether that thing's flashing there behind you. But that's the core that's, you know, Jesus could be very blunt even with his best friends. And Peter was his best friend. And we talked about that, didn't we, in the resurrection, go and tell the disciples and Peter, your best friend. Tell my best friend. But he says here of Peter, get behind me Satan.

[18:34] Imagine if I said that to one of you or if you said that to me, you know, get behind me Satan. You do not have in things the mind of God but things of men. You'd be absolutely horrified. He never speaks to me again. Talk about churches. You've never been in a church again. But

Jesus says to his best friend, get behind me Satan because he knows that behind what Peter is kind of blindly and with a loving but a wrong response saying, you know, I'll never let you die. I love you. He says, no, this is the way I need to go. This is where I have to be. This is why I have come. So that's the core of the gospel. That's the core of the gospel message. Now briefly, can I talk about the core then of discipleship? Because Jesus speaks about that as well. He doesn't just tell us about himself. He doesn't just tell us about why he's come and why this is so important. But he gives us the core of discipleship in verses 34 and 35. I was at a conference yesterday in Inverness speaking about church planting and it was a, I was doing seminars and someone asked at one point, you know, let's talk about Jesus and the gospel, you know, but what about living and following and obeying Jesus Christ. It's all very well inviting people to Christ and making a decision for Christ. But what about the rest of the lives? Now, I don't know that person misunderstood what I was trying to say. I wasn't trying to say at any point and

I don't think anyone's trying to say all that matters is that we, we notch up the numbers and get people to make professions of faith. Everything is about discipleship. But you can't be a disciple unless you first come to faith. The two are absolutely intertwined.

They come together and it's hugely significant that we understand that Jesus didn't want, doesn't just want us to say, oh, that's great. He died in the cross and forgive me. I trust in you. And then skip along as if that has no consequences in our lives because he says in his great commission, go into all the world and make disciples. What's a disciples? A follower. We're followers of Jesus. That means in our lives we're followers of Jesus.

And what's the core then of discipleship that he speaks about here? Then he called the crowd along to him with his disciples and said, if anyone would come after me, be my disciple, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. These are the biggest, strongest, most incredible words in the whole Bible. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man, a person to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my Father, the Father of the Son of Man, he will be ashamed of them. So the core of discipleship, we can listen now because we've gone beyond the evangelistic challenge and we're now into discipleship, living the Christian life. For all of us who are Christians here, it's self-denial, cross-bearing and following a person. It's self-denial. It's a very, in many ways, a very unpopular thing to talk about. People think, well, that's why I can't become a Christian because there's so much self-denial involved. But self-denial is simply the language of love. That's all it is. It's the language of love. It means that you love someone more than you love yourself. So you put them first. That's what self-denial means. It means, you know, if I've got a loving family, my siblings, and I find out about an inheritance and they don't know, now because I love them, I'm not going to sneak away with that inheritance and walk it in and put it in the bank and say, that's all for me. I'm taking this. But because I love them, I'll deny myself that pleasure. Ann's looking very relieved there in congregation. I'll deny myself that pleasure and I'll say, look, we've got a family inheritance here. I want to share it out with you all because we deny ourselves what we think might be even our right. I might have felt the right to it as the youngest, most talented child in the family. Joke. But it's not something that I would take because I love my brothers and sisters. And that's the core of the marriage vow, is it not? That we are denying ourselves the right to just love and go along with and go to bed with any man or woman we like. We're denying ourselves that because we love the person we vowed to spend the rest of our life with. That's the essence of love. Love is self-denial. It's denying ourselves sometimes legitimate things, but most significantly the sinful desires that take place in our lives.

So maybe today, I don't really think I'm much of a sinner. I don't think I'm doing much wrong. Only Jesus can point that out in your heart and you need to ask Him to do that. But even the legitimate things that you're doing and putting first, legitimate and they're not sinful and not wrong or immoral. If Christ is out of the picture, if He's not Lord of your life, if He's not first, then you're saying, well, actually Lord, I don't really love you. I love myself. And that's a battle we all face at our deepest level. Let's forget about battles within the church and battles with other people. The deepest battle we face is the battle with ourselves because let's be honest, we love ourselves. I love myself and the biggest battle is dealing with that. It's saying, not my will, Lord, but yours.

[24 : 27] You've shown me how much you love, not just you show me how much you love me. You've shown me who you are, that you've made me, that I'm accountable to you, that you know

every breath I take, that you will decide the day that I die, that I'm going to meet with you and there's an eternity in the future. But you've provided for me an astonishing love and in response to that, I live my life and say, not my will, but yours be done. Now there will be times when we are screaming out to do our own will. And we blame God and we think God's miserable and rotten and tough and harsh and you say, well, that can't be right.

I just want to do this. That's when our faith is challenged to say, not my will, but yours self denial, cross bearing. And again, I just want to stress the whole love thing because I don't want to become the idea that we're doing this kind of an earning anything from God. It's out of love for him. It's cross bearing that is willing to die to self, willing to put to death the things that separate us from us. It's admitting our guilt and saying, Lord Jesus, you can forgive that. It's about going against the crowd, you know. There wasn't any, there was only one, Jesus couldn't even carry some cross in the crowd. You can't get someone to do that for him. But symbolically, we are the people that need to carry our cross, the name of Jesus and the shame sometimes and the loneliness because we're not going to be Mr. Popular guy in the universe or Mrs. Popular girl in the universe if we're Christians, because there's going to be a point where we say, no, there's going to be a point where we say, no, I'm not going this way. I'm going the way of the cross and following Jesus. And that's what it is, isn't it? It's following Christ. It's denying himself, take up his cross and follow me. Is that not an utterly staggering description of discipleship? He claims that he wants people to follow him. He doesn't say follow rules. He doesn't say follow churches and creeds and confessions and denominations. He says follow me. Now, some of that other stuff might fall in behind. But he says follow me. And what he wants you to do is he wants you to follow in your knees and follow him. That's not a contradiction in pictures. Fall in your knees and get up and mentally follow him, spiritually follow him, physically follow him, follow Jesus Christ. Another thing that I said yesterday we were talking, you're getting all the repeats, is that the emphasis has been here not to make good free church people, but to make good Christians. If we make Christians who follow

Jesus, then they'll be good free church people. But you can be a good free church person and hate Jesus. Because it's not about churches, not about denominations because there will be none in heaven. It's about the relationship we have with Jesus and I'm not even the fact that we are here. It's the relationship we have with Jesus Christ. Are we following him?

See, there's no change, there's no shortcuts. There's actually no discussion here. There's no compromise, there's no negotiation. We don't come into God's breast, look, I quite like some of this stuff you're saying about sacrifice. But I don't like this start and the next thing. Can we come to compromise? Can we do half and half? I've got my religious cannot bring in a bit of the Christian, this and that, but I don't like what you're saying about whatever. It's not for discussion. Fall in our knees and submit to him because he's proven himself to be worthy of that. And we don't just follow him as long as everything's going great. We follow him when we're struggling and when it's tough and when it's miserable and when things are going badly and when every aorta of our being is saying, give up on this guy Jesus. He's a waster. Go your own way. Make your money. Make your choices. Get into the relationships you want. Just do it. Just don't worry about this idea of lordship and obedience and love and commitment and self denial and sacrifice. That's what Jesus says. And so he asks three questions. He asks, what about you? That's what he says to Peter and to the disciples. Jesus asking in verse 28, who do people say that I am? Some say John, some say Elijah. Jesus will, what about you? Who do you say that I am? You're not going to stand on the day of judgment before Jesus and say, hold on. Hold on. Can I get Derek?

[29 : 33] He'll tell you. He'll tell you who you are. It's not going to work that way. I'll be long gone. Jesus in his remarkable nature says through the word today, what about you? You're just just imagine today. You're alone in the universe. There's just you and him. And he said, well, what about you? I know there's there's lots of different things that you take on board and we listen to. But what about you and your own heart? You must decide. I must. It's no good for us just to stick our head in the sand. I don't know. I'll maybe wait. I'd like to see what will happen in life and just see how it spans out. But he's wanting us to come to decision because it's significant because it's important because he loves you and because he's offering life. You know, heart surgery, life dependent heart surgery. Well, I've got a couple of holidays first and I've got a new job to go to and

I've got my family to grow up. So maybe in 10 years time when we have that, do that. We don't do that with our physical bodies. And yet we can do it with our souls because we think we have plenty time and we think we will do it in our own time because that's about not being self denying. Isn't it?

It's still saying to God, I'm doing it in my time.

I'm still the boss. I'm still in control. And it's an expression of not being willing to deny ourselves to follow Jesus. What about you? He says, and he goes on to say, do you not realise then the question paraphrasing is do you not realise how precious you are?

Do you not realise how precious you are? He says, what good is it for a person to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul? What can someone give in exchange for their soul? What is it you have that you can give in exchange for your soul? What is it that you're willing to sell to give up your soul? What is your soul? It's the totality of your being. It's not just this kind of amorphous, ghost like thing that's inside your body that we somehow visualise. It's the totality of your being. And he says, how precious is it?

You know, whoever wants to save his life, it's kind of, it's life that's hollow. It's life that could end anytime. It's life that's unsure. It's life that's not guaranteed. He's saying, are you willing to hold onto that and be in control? Or are you willing to see how precious your soul is and willing to lose what you think is what you're holding on to in order to gain what is absolutely brilliant, fantastic, life-giving, life flowing through his forgiveness, hope, the power of God to change and transform our greedy, selfish, undisciplined hearts and to make us love other people and love the gospel and love all that he is and all that he has done for us. Our souls, what we are in our totality is never ending. And we don't just go six feet under and that's it. It's just not what it is. We're made in God's image and he says, what good is it for a person to gain a whole world and four feet of soul? What is it we value? Do we value God's Jesus' verdict on how precious we are?

[33 : 25] He says we're absolutely precious and he says, please don't try and hold on to what you can't keep in order to let go of what can be yours forever in Jesus Christ. What is more important in dealing with that? And with all the doubts and struggles and difficulties we have, he has to trust him.

The evidence is there. He has predicted that this is what he's come to do and with his perfect vision and he says, you know, you have to deny yourself in order to be a follower of Jesus.

Can I have to ask myself and I've had to ask myself this week, what does it mean for me to deny myself? What am I denying? What am I not putting first in order to put Christ first? That's a really hugely important question.

What are we saying your will be done not mine? That will be different for all of us. Different for all of us. And the last very brief question, what about you? He says, do you realise your precious soul is mass? Are you going to be ashamed of me?

And he talks about that, which links in with the reading from St. Thessalonians. He's ashamed of me. You know, life is hugely fragile and you know, we are gods. We think we're gods. We think we'll live forever. We think we're immortal. I know we don't mentally and scientifically and everything else, but we do. We do, but we don't and we're not. And he says, well, what do you think of me?

[35 : 07] What are you going to give in exchange for you? Are you ashamed of me today? Are you ashamed of what I've taught? Are you ashamed of what I said in St. Thessalonians? Are you ashamed that Jesus makes these statements? Are you ashamed of his ethics and his morality, but above all, are you ashamed to say that you love him and that he's your Lord? That's tough. It's tough for us to say that. We live in the generation of how to. There's how to books about everything. How to do this, how to do that, how to be good Christians, how to be good churches, how to plant churches, how to do the next thing, how to witness, how to share the gospel. We don't need a how to to share the gospel. You need a how to to share how much you love somebody or love something. We don't.

It's all individual. It's all personal. It's all about being willing to share about Jesus in our lives. It's not how to about that because it's real. And if it's a how to that we're doing, that's all it is. But it's got to be that we're not ashamed of him. And it comes from that. Well, I'm not ashamed of him. And listen to me. I'm preaching this to me. You just happen to be listening or not. I'm preaching it to me.

There's days and days and days when I know I'm ashamed of Jesus.

Because I'm a sinner. But I'm a sinner that gets forgiven and needs forgiveness. And he says, don't be ashamed of me, but love me and love this self denial and the self discipline and the cross bearing and the following because it's the way of light and it's the way of love. And he loves us and will pour out his infinite love into our hearts and lives. I do hope you will think about that message if you're not a Christian today. If you are a Christian, I do hope it will inspire you to love him more. And if you're, if you think you're somewhere in between, you're probably not. You're just not. And you need to move from that somewhere in between in your own mind and come to follow Jesus Christ.

He is the greatest saviour, the only saviour and the only answer to our needs. And he will, as we follow him, he will change us from the inside out. And that might be a battle. There might be good times and bad times, mountain peaks and troughs, but he will never leave you or forsake you in this life through the valley of the shadow of death and on into eternity. That is good news. I mean, let's pray briefly together. Lord God, help us to follow you, to love you, help us to commit our lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us to be forgiven when we plant ourselves firmly on the throne of our own lives and say, there is no one else coming here. So easy for us to do. Forgive us for that. Forgive us for following you when it's easy for us and when no self denial is required, when it's nice and pleasant and fun and loving and the fellowship is good. But forgive us then when we are bitter and angry, when it's tough or when we're asked to sacrifice our own desires for the will of God. And may we battle with that. And as we look tonight at the sufficiency of Scripture in our lives, may that be something we take also from our study that we see and know that Jesus has given us what we need to live our Christian lives in His Word and deal with our hearts, our stubborn and blighted hearts and heal them, we pray and give us love for you in Jesus' name. Amen.