

# The King's Pain

## *The Servant King & the King's Servants: A Study in Mark 1-10 Sermon 9*

Mark 8:31-38

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The walk from Bethsaida, along the sea of Galilee, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, is about 25 miles. Jesus makes the trek with his disciples about midway through the Gospel of Mark and puts to them the question many have been wondering: *"Who do people say that I am?"* (8:27). *"Some say 'John the Baptist, others, Elijah, others a prophet'"* (8:28), they reply. Jesus presses the question to them: *"But who do you say that I am?"* Peter replies, *"You are the Christ"* (8:29).

Midway through the Gospel, a first-time reader might think we've reached its summit. Finally, the disciples recognize who Jesus is. The "Christ," which means, "Messiah," which means "anointed one," which means "king." Since Peter was a little boy, he'd heard stories from Scripture about this coming king, this Son of Man, this Christ. He'd heard prophecies like this one from Daniel 7:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a Son of Man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).

The disciples understand they're on the cusp of history. The Christ will go to Jerusalem, vanquish Israel's enemies, and establish the throne of Israel forever: an everlasting dominion, in glory. But like the student who thinks they've mastered mathematics at the close of Algebra, only to be thrust into Calculus, Peter's clarity about Jesus' identity is immediately thrust back into confusion. Jesus, speaking boldly and plainly (v.32), explodes their assumptions about the Christ, the Son of Man:

The Son of Man [remember this glorious figure from the Daniel prophecy, (Daniel 7:13)] must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again (8:31).

Not only is this unexpected, but it also makes no sense. A suffering Christ? A rejected Messiah? A dead king? There was no category in Jewish thinking at the time to associate the victorious Christ with a suffering and defeated leader. Perhaps the Christ would face some opposition, perhaps be bloodied in battle, but killed? No.

Peter, concerned about how confusing this will be for the others, takes Jesus aside and rebukes him (v. 32). Jesus responds to Peter in some of the strongest words in the Gospels: “Get behind me Satan” (8:33). Jesus equates resistance to his suffering with satanic designs.

The turning point of Mark’s Gospel is not just a recognition that Jesus is the Christ. It’s a recognition that the Christ must suffer and die. To stress the importance of this, we find Jesus predicting his suffering and death three times in this small section: 8:31; 9:31; 10:34.

To grasp the seriousness of Jesus’ teaching, we need to notice what may be the most important word in our passage in Mark 8:31-38. It’s the word “must” in verse 31: “The Son of Man must suffer many things.” Jesus doesn’t say the Son of Man may suffer or will suffer; but that he *must* suffer. The word carries the sense of necessity; *it is necessary*, Jesus is saying to his disciples, *that I go to die*.

But why must Jesus suffer and die? If his mission means bringing the kingdom of God to earth, has he not already shown the ability to do this? Is his power not enough? He can heal diseases and drive out demons. Couldn’t he just go on doing this? Is his wisdom not enough? He teaches with such depth and authority; couldn’t he go on giving us the guidance and answers we need to build God’s kingdom here on earth? Is his example not enough? He’s loved across all social boundaries—loved the poor, the sinner, the Gentile. Is this not enough to inspire us to love the other? How would suffering and dying add anything to this, besides maybe the exclamation point of martyrdom?

Here is our question to take up today:

***Why is the death of Jesus necessary? What must he suffer many things and die?***

Addressing this question is pushing out into the deep. It’s not easy to understand at first—as Peter’s reaction shows. But there are clues here to guide us. What we’ll do, out in this deep ocean, is take three

soundings. We'll try to get to the bottom and see what's down there. We'll notice three reasons Jesus' suffering and death must happen: (1) Debt; (2) Curse; (3) Love.

## I. A Debt to Pay

The first reason Christ must die is to pay a debt that we cannot pay. We see this idea in verse 37: "For what can a man give in return for his soul?" This is a strange statement. It borrows language from the marketplace. We should picture a person trying to buy something in the market and wondering if they have enough money to pay for it.

But in this case, they are trying to pay for their soul. The word "soul" comes from the Greek word *psyche* (ψυχή), from which comes our modern word, psychology. Jesus is asking, "What price must a man pay to buy back the totality of his existence—his life?" We might think of someone trying to buy back years that have gone by, or to buy a clean conscience, or to buy a sense of goodness. But this still seems strange. How has it come about that we need to buy ourselves back? Who, or what has come to possess or own us? To understand what Jesus is getting at, we need to recall some basic laws of nature surrounding wrongdoing and debt.

### **The cost of making things right**

Life works according to some basic principles. One of which is the scale of right and wrong, justice, and righteousness. When something wrong is done, there is a need that arises to make it right. And to make a wrong, right, costs something.

Let's say you run into my car with your car, doing \$1,000 worth of damages. Two things can happen. You can pay me \$1,000 so I can fix it, thus canceling your debt. Or I can forgive you, in which case I still have to spend \$1,000 to fix my car. Either way, your wrong can only be made right, through paying a price.

Now let's say you don't wreck my car, but my life. You lie about me, defame me, and it leads to me losing my job, family, friends—everything. What do you owe me now? More than \$1,000. You might be in a position where you cannot afford to pay me back—what could you give a man in exchange for his life? (Psalm 49:7-8). And suppose I were to forgive you. There still is this horrific cost I am bearing. How can your wrong, possibly be made right?

Now let's take this vertical: suppose we've damaged God, hurt God, struck God: by how we've treated people made in God's image; by how we've robbed God of praise He is due; by how we've turned away from Him and lived our own way. This creation is God's car. Human beings are God's reputation (image bearers). Have we not wrecked enough of God's world to incur a debt? How do we pay this off?

A person can end up feeling as though they are one great debt; a debt they cannot pay off. If true life is peace with God, righteousness, holiness, and love, and a great debt keeps us from all these realities—then who, or what, owns our life? Our life is under-water, impounded, foreclosed on; until we can pay.

“For what can a man give in return for his soul?” The Psalmist in Psalm 49 answers:

Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on forever and never see the pit (Psalm 49:7-9).

## **Ransomed, redeemed**

Unless, God acts to forgive you, deciding to incur the cost upon Himself. Hear how Jesus describes his ministry to humankind in Mark 10:45, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). “Ransom,” like the word “redeem,” are biblical terms that call our minds to the marketplace—to the world of buying and exchanging. Jesus is the price for your life.

How, exactly, does Jesus pay this price? Through his blood, meaning his life laid down in death. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:7). Why must the Son of Man die? Because we have a debt we cannot pay. In God's unfathomable mercy, He was willing to give His only begotten Son, to pay the price for our debt.

The wrongness of my soul can only be made right by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. If you are a Christian, the sign on your life reads, in red letters: **Paid in Full.**

There is more. A second reason Christ must die: to break the curse.

## II. A Curse to Break

Here we need to plumb a name in verse 33. Not Peter. Satan. Notice that Jesus brings Satan into the conversation in verse 32, “Get behind me, Satan” he responds to Peter’s attempt to deter him. He’s not saying Peter is Satan. He’s saying that resistance to his suffering falls under a satanic scheme. Jesus is seeing in Peter’s mindset the mindset of Satan. Satan doesn’t want the Messiah to suffer, any more than Peter does.

Recall that prior to Jesus’ ministry, he spent 40 days in the wilderness fasting and was there tempted by Satan. Jesus is brutally hungry and aware that a great task lies before him. And Satan finds him to tempt Jesus to avoid the path of pain, and instead take the road of pleasure.

“Turn these stones into bread”—you’re hungry after all (see Matthew 4:3). Jesus chooses to remain hungry.

“Throw yourself off the Temple and let the angels catch you, so that “you don’t strike your foot against a stone” (Matthew 4:5), Satan tempts next. No, in due time, the “shepherded will be struck” (Mark 14:27; 65).

And again, “The devil took [Jesus] up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, ‘to you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours” (Luke 4:5-7).

There is a path to power that doesn’t require pain, Satan whispers to Jesus. Why doesn’t Satan want the Messiah to suffer?

Recall that in the last temptation, we learn that all the kingdoms of the world have been “delivered” to Satan, that he has “authority” over them (Luke 4:5-7). This is a remarkable, and terrifying thought. And one the Bible teaches straightforwardly: the world is not a neutral zone; it’s a war zone. And it’s either under the lordship of Jesus Christ, or under the lordship of sin, death, and Satan.

“Therefore, a curse devours the earth,” wrote the prophet Isaiah, “and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left” (Isaiah 24:6).

God announces this curse in Genesis 3 (Genesis 3:14; 17; 4:11).<sup>1</sup> And this curse is the opposite of God’s full blessing. Its effects, like a spell, set us under the sway of other powers. When we rebelled against God’s lordship, we didn’t become free but came under a new lord. In sin, we become slaves to sin (John 8:34; Romans 6:20). Death, Paul says, is like a king over us, “death reigns” (ἐβασίλευσεν ὁ θάνατος, Romans 5:14).

In Ephesians 2, Paul speaks in such a way that we seem under a spell, spiritual and cultural forces, inner passions, leading us by the nose:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind.... (Ephesians 2:1-3).

To be under a curse, or a spell is to be guided by another influence, often without realizing it. This idea, that our lives are more determined by other powers than by our own free will, is not as radical as it may sound:

Modern people talk about “genetic determinism,” wondering how our genes and biology foreordain and determine our behavior.<sup>2</sup> “*My biology made me do it*”. There is also “social, or environment determinism”; “*the influences around me, the systems, made me like this.*”<sup>3</sup> Or think of the popular phrase, “woke.” This term stands for people waking up to see the world in a new way. And it assumes, therefore, that it’s quite possible, and very common, for people to be “asleep” even though they seem perfectly aware.

The idea, then, that we can live under the control and influence of things other than a freewill, is not only not far-fetched; it’s an idea that deserves deep consideration. As one theologian writes, “all through the world [sin] takes possession of us as power and destiny.... There is no such thing as human

autonomy. One is never simply oneself but always the projection of an all-encompassing power, the copy and image of whichever lord has commandeered one for service.”<sup>4</sup>

We are under a curse, and in this state, under the spell of dark forces. What can we do? Nothing. What does Jesus do? Everything.

On the cross, we read in Colossians 2:15, God “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Christ” (Colossians 2:15). What of this curse? We read in Galatians 3:13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Galatians 3:13; citing Deuteronomy 21:23).<sup>5</sup>

How did all this work? Think of a virus. Sometimes to kill a virus affecting livestock, people will isolate and kill the animals that have it. This is the only way to stop the spread. And when the animals with the virus die, so too does the virus. When a virus kills its host, unless it’s first spread, it in fact commits suicide, killing itself. Imagine that Jesus comes into our humanity and takes on this curse of sin and death. He represents his people when he dies to the viruses of sin and death on the cross.

So, if your life is hidden with Christ, the virus has spent itself in the body of Christ. And in his death, it died. It no longer has power over you. Your contact with Jesus, by faith, inoculates you. His blood is inculcated and heals you from this curse and virus. An imperfect analogy, to be sure. But an attempt to help us understand yet a second reason why Christ must suffer and die: to break the curse that’s put us under a spell.

### III. A Love to Give

Finally, one more thing to glean from the necessity of Jesus’ sufferings.

In the middle of Jesus’ heated interchange with Peter, we read that Jesus “turned and saw his disciples” (8:32). I’ve puzzled over this detail in the passage. Why is it there? It may convey that Jesus didn’t want the rest of the disciples to be influenced by Peter’s ideas. Or it may be that Jesus knew Peter would be the key leader of the new church, and so Jesus needed to correct Peter in front of those who would one day look up to Peter.

But I also can't help but sense in this glance something of the heart of the Good Shepherd. This is the Jesus who, back in Mark 6, "saw a great crowd and had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34). And I wonder if yet another aspect of the cross is that it was the necessary way to forever establish the new relationship between God and His people.

God's relationship—His covenant—with His people was always born out of grace. But now, through the cross, God shows us the unimaginable depths of His love for us, in that "God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

If there was ever any doubt about the depths of God's love; ever any doubt about the enduring nature of God's faithfulness; even any doubt about who would bear the pain to keep us in a marriage with God—the cross forever answers that question.

"He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things" (8:31). If we understand our plight, if we feel our sin, if we reckon with the powers around us and within us, if we consider the needs of our shaky hearts—how could it be any other way?

Debt paid. Curse broken. Love perfected. And this all can be yours if you open your heart to The Christ, The Suffering Messiah.

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## Endnotes

1. The "curse" factor runs across the Bible, beginning with the curse upon the serpent (Gen 3:14), ground (Gen 3:17), Cain (Gen 4:11), those who dishonor Abraham and his people (Gen 12:3). Paul refers to it in Romans 8 regarding all of creation: <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God... <sup>23</sup> And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:20-23). The consummation of redemption is likened to a curse being lifted in Revelation, "<sup>3</sup>



No longer will there be anything **accursed**, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him” (Rev 22:3).

2. <https://dictionary.apa.org/genetic-determinism>: Genetic determinism is defined by the American Psychological Association as: the doctrine that human and nonhuman animal behavior and mental activity are largely (or completely) controlled by the genetic constitution of the individual and that responses to environmental influences are for the most part innately determined.
3. See “Social Determinism,” *Oxford Reference*. Retrieved 12 Nov. 2022, from <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100515931>.
4. Ernst Käsemann, “The Theological Relevance of the Word ‘Possession’ in the New Testament, in *On Being a Disciple of the Crucified Nazarene* (Eerdmans, 2010), 64.
5. See also, “<sup>3</sup> No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. (Rev 22:3).