

“Sometimes You Get Something Better”

Mark 8:27–36; Romans 3:21–26; John 21:15–19

Getting something better than you wanted, better than you ever dreamed of, is one of life’s great joys.

What did Peter and many of his fellow second-temple Jews want? They wanted God to step up and put things right. To raise up a messiah who would arrive in power and glory and wonder and might. They wanted God to give the Jews a true king who would defeat the pagan oppressors, cleanse God’s Temple, and usher in the kingdom of God.

This desire was so intense among some that they decided to take matters into their own hands. Some grabbed a sword (the zealots), some imagined that they could force God to act if they could keep the Law in all its detail (the Pharisees), some simply moved away so that God could act through them to do what they thought ought to be done (the Essenes).

They all knew what they wanted and were totally unprepared when God gave them something else, *something better*. Not another sword-wielding king, but a solution to the unfaithfulness of God’s people and the sin of the world, a solution that required God doing for them what they were unwilling to do for themselves. A solution grounded in mercy, in sacrifice...in love. A solution that would be realized on a Roman cross.

Peter’s confession in Caesarea Philippi

A few weeks ago we took a long look at Peter’s confession of Jesus as messiah and his near-immediate declaration that suffering and death could never be the way of God’s Anointed One/Messiah. Peter knew he wanted a messiah; he was simply not getting the sort of messiah he wanted. But there is more, as explained by Donald English:

Lest this should not be enough shock for one day [Yes, the Messiah must suffer and die], Jesus now adds another, this time for the crowd as well as the disciples (Mark 8:34–9:11). Not only must he go this way of death; so too must anyone who would be a disciple of his. As C. F. D. Moule points out, Jesus is not using crossbearing to describe the human experience of carrying some burden through life. It is much more comprehensive than that. ‘People carrying crosses were people going to execution.’ Cross-bearing as a follower of Jesus means nothing less than giving one’s whole life over to following him. And here comes another surprise. This is the way of total freedom. If you clutch your life wholly to yourself, protecting it against all others, asserting all your rights, needs and privileges, you lose it because it isn’t life any longer. If, however, you acknowledge that life is not yours by right, that all is privilege, and that it is to be lived in the love that the gospel story reveals, self-giving love, then you possess it wholly. There is now nothing to lose and everything to gain. Supposing you gain all the world’s riches, and lose the inner freedom of loving and being loved by God—what then? What will you give in exchange for that divinely given inwardness, which is the center of all that is spiritual, the aspect of everything you are, where God wishes to dwell? These are the choices now being offered by Jesus, Messiah, Son of Man. The apparently gloomy news of the cross is actually the way to total freedom and fulfilment.¹



¹ Donald English, *The Message of Mark: The Mystery of Faith*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 161.

“Something better” -- A promise kept

Why was Jesus born? For what purpose? Why did God humble himself, taking on a full-blooded humanity? If your answer to these questions is “to save us,” you are right so far as it goes. But God’s rescue involves far more than just ourselves. It is the keeping of promises that God made long before.

Seeing Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection as the demonstration that God not only makes promises but keeps them is the key theme of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Like Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul lived in a time of great turmoil, as many Jews resisted Roman rule. They awaited the day when God would finally keep his promises, when, as written in the scroll of Jeremiah, “I [God] will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

But they had waited a long time and it was natural for some to wonder if God’s promises would forever go unfulfilled. The Jews knew that they weren’t really keeping their end of the covenant God had made with them – they didn’t really love God and neighbor every day.

Yet God had made the promise. And, for Paul, God is righteous and had kept the promises he had made – through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the way out of the covenant dilemma. In a sense, Jesus was the “righteousness of God” in the flesh. Despite the unwillingness or inability of the Jews to live up to the covenant and to be the light to the world, God had provided the means of covenant-keeping. This means was Jesus Christ, the one Jew who did truly love God and love neighbor without fail. Jesus’ own faithfulness all the way to the cross revealed that God is not only the promise maker, but the promise keeper. In Christ, God’s covenant people had been restored to a right relationship with God. Hence, they had been saved. And who are these covenant people? Namely those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

To reiterate, God’s righteousness (his covenant faithfulness) was revealed to the world through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, for the rescuing of all who believe. Peter and the others wanted a warrior; they got a divine savior.

“Something better” -- God’s forgiveness

In Peter’s story we see the true meaning of this “something better.” Three times Peter denied Jesus in the early morning hours before the crucifixion. First to a servant girl. Then to a small group huddled around a fire. Then to a servant of the high priest. “Aren’t you one of this man’s disciples,” they asked him. “No, I am not,” he replied. His denials are understandable; he is scared, as simple as that. He had thought Jesus would be the warrior king he imagined, but that all came crashing down on a cross, driving him into denial and hiding. How those three moments must have haunted him in the days afterward. To deny Jesus, the one you had come to know as Messiah and Lord. Just try to imagine yourself as Peter. Would the despair from disappointment and betrayal not have been overwhelming?

And then the resurrection. Jesus lives! Alleluia! But the memory of Peter’s denial lives too. Perhaps nothing had been said between the two of them until the breakfast John describes. But now, as they finish their meal on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus turns to Peter and asks him, “Do you love me?” Not once, not twice, but three times. Peter gets it. He must. Three times, “Do you love me.” Each time, Peter replies, “Lord, you know that I love you.” Does Jesus know this to be true? Does Peter mean it, truly now, for better and for worse?

Each of Peter’s professions of love is met by Jesus with a similar command: “Feed my lambs . . . take care of my sheep . . . feed my sheep.” Professing love is one thing; doing love is another. True love is grounded in doing, not saying. Thus, Peter is pledging not merely his love, he is pledging his life to Jesus. It is the life of “serving one another humbly in love,” to use a phrase from Paul (Gal. 5:13), that will be the evidence of Peter’s love of Jesus.

Jesus warns Peter too. The road ahead will be difficult and, for Peter, will end in a martyr’s death. Then, Jesus closes this exchange with a simple, “Follow me,” ending where Jesus began (John 1:39,43). In truth, though, it

is far from simple. Every single bit of Peter is to be committed to the love and life he has pledged to Jesus. Nothing can be held back. As Bruce Milne writes:

The experience of being forgiven clears the way for serving Jesus. Peter restored is Peter recommissioned. Jesus' concern here is not just for Peter's welfare and selfconfidence; he is also genuinely concerned for his fledgling church. So Peter is directed to his work: *Feed my lambs, Take care of my sheep, Feed my sheep* (15–17). Following Jesus and loving Jesus mean accepting responsibility for Jesus' people, a truth which is in need of rehabilitation at the present time. Commitment to Christ involves commitment to the church of Christ. Jesus Christ is not a 'single' person in the sense that he comes to us without other attachment. He is a 'married' person; he comes to us with a bride, whom he loves and for whom he sacrificed himself (Eph. 5:25). To be in relationship to Christ while ignoring or even despising his bride is no more acceptable than such behavior would be in human contexts when relating to a married friend; far less so, because the relationship with Jesus has infinitely greater dimensions. Genuine New Testament conversion means not only turning to and accepting Christ. It also means turning to and accepting his bride, the church. Jesus' love for his church remains undiminished even though the church be torn, ill-clad, dirty in places, and generally malnourished and diseased. The church is still his bride, the people for whom he died, and who are therefore the burden of his concern. So he speaks his word today to those who will hear it: *Feed my lambs, Take care of my sheep, Feed my sheep.*²

² Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!*: With Study Guide, The Bible Speaks Today, (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 318.