

THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS IS THE SEEDBED OF THE CHURCH

Mark 8:31-38

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

MESSAGE:

Jesus’ words must have fallen like a bombshell on his disciples’ ears! Mark places these verses between two mileposts of Jesus’ ministry: Peter’s confession of faith that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, and His transfiguration—when He revealed His divinity to Peter, James and John on the mountaintop. These were the sort of things Jesus’ disciples had come to expect from Him: Messianic things!

There were other Messianic things Jesus had done. He had multiplied five loaves of bread and a few fish into enough food to feed five thousand people. He had held large throngs of people spellbound with his teaching for days at a time. He had calmed storms, walked on water, cast out demons and restored sight to the blind. He had even brought a dead girl back to life. These were the kinds of things people expected from a Messiah. But now Jesus has telling them that it was all going end in his rejection, suffering and death. What a letdown! Their hero, their demigod, which was probably what they thought Jesus was, the one who was supposed to lead Israel into a new age of glory was going to be rejected by the religious leadership, humiliated, tortured and killed. Later in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is even more graphic. He says that the Son of Man will be mocked, spit upon, scourged and crucified.

Now remember, Jesus’ followers didn’t know “the end of the story”—like we do. They were on the other side of Easter and the only kind of victory they could imagine didn’t

come in the form of humiliation, suffering and death. So Peter's reaction is not only understandable—it's the only reasonable reaction he could have had—I'm pretty sure we would have reacted the same way. Jesus' words provoked violent emotions: disappointment, chagrin, anger, fear, resentment, confusion—so it's no wonder that Peter tried to talk Jesus out of his self-destructive plans. But when he does, Jesus turns on him violently and says: *"Get behind me Satan!"*

Wow! Can you imagine what that must have felt like? Your best friend, your Lord and your Savior, responds to your expression of love and concern by calling you "Satan"! Then he adds, *"You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of man!"*

Now whereas Peter's expression of concern is understandable, Jesus' response must have been incomprehensible. As if he knew this, Jesus gathered his followers around him and explained what he meant. And the eighteen words that follow are the heart and soul of everything Jesus came to say and to do. *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* (Mark 8:34)

Now let's be honest: these words are hard to hear. Hard for the people who heard them when he spoke them and hard for us as well. Not only was Jesus planning to suffer and die; he was inviting his followers—including us—to suffer and die with him.

What a recruiting strategy! Can you imagine a recruiter from a major corporation visiting a top-ranked business school to hire their best and the brightest graduates and saying to them: *"Come to work for us and we'll show you how to suffer and die!"* How do you think that would go over at Harvard Business School or Case Western?

Strangely enough, his recruitment strategy worked out pretty well, didn't it? It worked for twelve Apostles who willingly suffered and died for their faith. It worked for thousands of martyrs in the days of the Roman Empire who were tortured and killed for refusing to renounce their faith. Through their witness Christianity grew and grew until it came to be said that the blood of the martyrs was the seedbed of the church. And it resulted now—two thousand years later—in two-fifths of the earth's population calling themselves Christian.

Jesus calls us to be his witnesses. The word "martyr" comes from a Greek word used in the *New Testament* which simply means "witness." Now there are many ways to witness to our faith in Jesus Christ. Today I'd like you to watch a short video about one witness who has been an inspiration to Christians around the world. [SHOW VIDEO: <https://vimeo.com/233342428>]

Fortunately, we live in a country where we are not called upon to endure the suffering Richard Wurmbrand endured in order to witness to our faith. At least not yet. But as the clouds of persecution begin to gather over the church in America—and make no mistake, they are gathering—we will find witnessing more and more daunting. But always keep in mind that just as the blood of the martyrs was the seedbed of the church in the early

Roman days, Christian martyrs around the world are still shedding their blood so that others may come to Christ. The organization we are honoring today—Voice of the Martyrs—supports and speaks for these witnesses.

If anyone would like to contribute to the work of Voice of the Martyrs, there will be a collection plate in the narthex.

Amen.