

Preparing to Die

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[0 : 00] Martin Luther King Jr.'s I Have a Dream speech was delivered to 250,000 civil rights supporters on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. on the 28th of August 1963.

And his speech mobilized supporters and prompted the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. But two months earlier, Martin Luther King Jr. led marchers in the Walk to Freedom in Detroit, Michigan on the 23rd of June 1963.

And this drew an estimated 125,000 people. And it was regarded as the largest civil rights demonstration in the nation's history to date.

At the rally, Martin Luther King Jr. gave an impassioned speech in which he said, You'll develop the inner conviction that there are some things so dear, some things so precious, some things so eternally true that they are worth dying for.

And I submit to you that if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live. King said some things are worth dying for.

[1 : 19] And King himself, motivated by his own strong Christian principles, was later assassinated for the cause that he devoted his life to. His life and his words challenge us to consider whether we believe in something so dear, so precious, so eternally true that it's worth dying for.

Well, centuries before, Jesus Christ, through his life and his words, challenges us to consider if we are living for a cause that's worth dying for.

Jesus was talking about following him. Because in calling people to follow him, Jesus made it clear that we must be ready to die for him. But is it worth it?

Is it worth devoting your life to Jesus Christ? Jesus assures us that it is. That's what we discover today in our Bible reading in Mark chapter 8.

We're at the great turning point in the Gospel of Mark. And it's the climax of the first half as the disciples eventually see the true identity of Jesus. Peter declared, you are the Messiah.

[2 : 29] The Messiah is God's chosen king, the one who came to save and to put everything right. And so it's after this significant moment of recognition that Jesus then starts to teach why he came and what it means to follow him.

So Jesus makes it clear that he came to die. Mark chapter 8 verse 31. And if anyone's going to follow Jesus, then they must die too.

In Mark chapter 8 verse 34. So let's listen to what Jesus says. Because it matters for us whether we'd call ourselves a Christian or not. So this morning I'd like to look at two simple points.

The first is Jesus came to die. Verse 31 to 33. And the second is we must die too. Verse 34 to 38. So Jesus came to die. Secondly, we must die too. First of all, Jesus came to die. Jesus here predicts his death. Let me read that.

[3 : 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.

This is the first of three predictions that Jesus makes about his death and his resurrection. Here Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man. It's a title that he's used before.

And he's saying more than just that he's a human being. Jesus is associating himself with a divine messianic figure in the Old Testament book of Daniel.

In Daniel chapter 7 verse 13 and 14, it refers to one like a son of man. The one to whom God gives authority and sovereign power over all peoples.

And so Jesus is this glorious Messiah King. But Jesus says the Son of Man must suffer and die. Jesus knew exactly how he'd die, who his killers would be, and that he'd rise again three days later.

[4 : 39] So it wasn't just that Jesus would die. Jesus said he must be killed. His death was necessary. So as well as Jesus claiming to be the Messiah King, prophesied in the Old Testament, Jesus is also the suffering servant, also prophesied in the Old Testament.

Isaiah, the prophet spoke in Isaiah chapter 53, referring to the servant being pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities.

So Jesus was teaching his disciples that he is the Messiah, but the Messiah who must be killed. So his death wouldn't be an accident because he came on a mission to willingly give up his life and die. Jesus made this clear to his disciples, but it made no sense to them. And so we read, he spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

So the notion that Jesus would be killed didn't fit with Peter's expectations of the Messiah. How could the Messiah put everything right if he would be rejected and killed?

[5 : 56] It sounded ridiculous. That's why Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Now the word for rebuke here is a very strong one. It's actually used elsewhere in Mark for what Jesus does to demons.

And so Peter is condemning Jesus in the strongest possible terms. Jesus shouldn't be talking like this. Peter couldn't accept that the Messiah must suffer, let alone die.

If Jesus could heal the sick, if he could exercise demons, if he could control the weather, if he could raise the dead, why would he die? How could the king bring in the kingdom if he's dead?

He should have been heading for a throne, not for a cross. But Peter was so wrong about the mission of Jesus. He wanted a victorious Messiah who would liberate his people with power.

He didn't realize that Jesus' victory would come through his death and resurrection. So Jesus didn't come to take power, but to give it up. And that's why Jesus turned on Peter to rebuke him.

[7 : 04] And so we read. 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 mere human concerns.

Jesus' condemnation of Peter shows just how necessary his death was. It was the only way it could be. All Jesus said about his rejection and his death had to happen.

And that's why any talk to the contrary was satanic. It was from the devil. Peter was speaking against God's plan for Jesus. And he was verbalizing Satan's plan, which was for Jesus to avoid the cross.

So Jesus makes it clear that he had to die. But why? Peter didn't get it at this point. But it's still something that many struggle to understand.

Why would Jesus have to die? Why was the death of Jesus necessary? Surely if God wanted to do something, couldn't he do it without Jesus being crucified?

[8 : 10] Well, a bit later, Jesus told his disciples why he came to give up his life. Listen to what Jesus says in Mark chapter 10 and verse 45.

He says, For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Now a ransom is a price paid to release someone from their slavery.

And we're all enslaved to sin and death, even if we didn't realize it. And yet there's no way that we can release ourselves or set ourselves free.

And so it's a massive problem because our sin separates us from God. Our sin is a debt that needs to be paid. And so if someone's convicted of a crime in court, they'll be sentenced to pay the debt for their crime to society in some way.

Somebody has to pay for the wrong if justice is to be done. And so say if it's a speeding offense, then it'll be a fine and some points on the driving license.

[9 : 19] If it's a murder, then it will be an extended prison sentence. Whatever it is, the debt for the wrong or the evil must be paid. But how can we ever repay the debt of our sin to God?

Well, we can't. And yet God in his holiness just can't allow sin. So God in his justice must punish. And that's why Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for many. Only Jesus can pay the debt of our sin to God through his perfect life and sacrificial death.

And so the cross is where God's love and God's justice meet together. Where God's wrath against our sin was taken by Jesus.

So we don't need to face it. That's why Jesus had to die. He came to serve us by giving up his life to pay for our sin.

[10 : 25] There's no other way. Either Jesus pays the penalty for our sin on the cross or we must pay ourselves in hell. And that's why Jesus so emphatically said he must suffer and die.

That's our first point. Jesus came to die. Second point is we must die too. The second thing Jesus says here is that if we are going to follow him, then we must be prepared to die.

Listen to what he says again. 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. Jesus is addressing everyone here. Whoever wants to be my disciple, he says. And so as we consider this, we shouldn't forget that the way Jesus calls us to go is the way that he's already gone himself through his own suffering and death.

So Jesus calls us to deny ourselves. Now, this is much more than just abstaining from certain things like giving up chocolate for Lent or whatever.

[11 : 37] What Jesus says here is far more radical. If we are going to deny ourselves, we are going to have to surrender everything to Jesus. That means our own agenda for life.

So our desires, our hopes, our dreams, our priorities, our preferences, our interests, our comfort, everything. We'll put Jesus and his gospel first instead of ourselves.

And yet this kind of deny yourself thinking is completely countercultural, isn't it? Our culture doesn't do self-denial. It does what's called expressive individualism.

So it says you have to be true to yourself. You become who you are and express yourself any way you want. So you set your own agenda.

You fulfill your own desires. You pursue your own dreams. You look after yourself, promote yourself, love yourself, indulge yourself.

[12 : 39] But don't deny yourself. Never deny yourself. And that's why the words of Jesus here just hit us like a brick in the face.

But following Jesus doesn't just involve denying yourself. Jesus calls us to take up our cross. Well, what does he mean? Well, to take up a cross meant crucifixion.

And crucifixion was the most barbaric form of Roman execution. And it was reserved for the very worst of criminals. And so the image is of a condemned person carrying their cross to the site of execution where they'd be nailed to it and they'd die a shameful death.

So Jesus isn't calling his followers to an easy life. And that's why we can't trivialize what Jesus is saying. Like when you sometimes hear, well, we've all got our crosses to bear.

Meaning you've just got to put up with your bad back or your boring job or your difficult neighbors or whatever. No, to a first century person, the cross was horrific.

[13 : 48] And so following Jesus means being ready to face anything up to and including death itself. It may be martyrdom as it was for some of the disciples, as well as for many throughout history and still for millions of Christians around the world today.

And that's why Jesus didn't put this in the small print when he asked us to sign up. He's up front and he speaks in no uncertain terms. This is genuine Christianity.

It means denying yourself, taking up your cross and following Jesus. And so if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, please don't be in any doubt about what's involved in following Jesus Christ.

It does mean being ready to die for him. And yet, any talk of suffering today is so far removed from our Western minds.

And so even if we would call ourselves a Christian, we prefer the comfort of Christianity instead of the cost. We prefer the happiness, but none of the hardship.

[15 : 01] We like the privileges, but none of the pain. We enjoy the blessings, but we don't want the battles. We love the glory, but none of the shame. Yet, if that wasn't the way for Jesus, how can we expect it to be the way for us?

So the question is, how do we know if we are ready to die for Jesus? Well, just take a quick thought experiment. Are we known as a follower of Jesus at work?

If we aren't, we can't be ready to die for Jesus. Are we willing to speak for Jesus, knowing that we'll be mocked or rejected? If not, then we can't be ready to die for Jesus.

Are we ready to give up a nice holiday abroad so that we can invest in some gospel work instead? If not, then we probably aren't ready to die for Jesus.

Are we prepared to give up our time each week to serve Christ's church? If we aren't, then we can't really be ready to die for Jesus.

[16:10] I guess we could go on and on, but you get the idea. Jesus is clear. Following him is costly. Now, Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew this.

He was a German pastor who resisted the Nazi regime in World War II. He was imprisoned and then hanged just before the war ended. And in his classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, he wrote these words.

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ's suffering, which every man must experience, is the call to abandon the attachments of this world.

As we embark upon discipleship, we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death. We give over our lives to death. Thus it begins.

The cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise God-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. And then he says, When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

[17:16] When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. That was Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship*. And so, no matter how costly it is to go Jesus' way, the opposite way is even costlier.

Just listen to what Jesus goes on to say. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? Jesus does a cost-benefit analysis here in order to show us the best way to invest our lives.

And it's paradoxical. So if we try to save our life, we will lose it. But if we lose our life for Jesus and the gospel, then we'll save it. Which means it's a waste of time investing our lives in this world at the expense of our souls.

So if our life is based on accumulating wealth, acquiring possessions, advancing our careers, sculpting our bodies, following the latest fashions, then no matter how successful we are, Jesus tells us it's of no lasting value.

[18:36] So Jesus tells us it's far better to invest for eternity by following him now, than to invest in this world and to lose out for eternity.

Jesus doesn't want us to waste our lives on what won't last. He wants us to follow him now because one day he's coming back. And when he does, that's when everything will make sense.

And so he says, Jesus says he's coming back as judge.

And when he does, he'll treat us in the same way that we've treated him. And so if we've been loyal to him, then he'll be loyal to us at the end.

But if we've been ashamed of Jesus and his words and the life that God has given to us, then when he comes back, he'll be ashamed of us and we'll be abandoned in hell. Because we can't expect to be in heaven with Jesus if we've turned away from Jesus in this life.

[19:46] And that makes logical sense. But what doesn't make sense is a failure to associate with Jesus now. Because when Jesus returns in his father's glory with the holy angels, and we are forced to stand before him, just think how pathetic our fear of people will seem then.

Jesus assures us that whatever it costs us to follow him now will be more than made up for in the future. How do we know? Well, because of what Jesus said to his listeners then.

And he said to them, Truly, I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.

Jesus is referring to his resurrection. When those with him back then would see him again after he died and then rose.

And so as we close today, for all who are prepared to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Jesus, they can be sure, we can be sure, that whatever the cost, it will be eclipsed by the reality of our resurrection.

[21:02] Because if we aren't prepared to carry our cross now, we can't look forward to a crown then. And so, is it worth following Jesus?

C.S. Lewis answers well at the end of his book, *Mere Christianity*. Listen to what he says. Give up yourself and you will find your real self.

Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day, and death of your whole body in the end. Submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life.

Keep nothing back. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay.

But look for Christ, and you will find him, and with him, everything else thrown in. And so it's only when we grasp why Jesus came to die, he came to die for my sins, that we're able to accept that we must die too.

[22 : 22] So we're only able to follow the way of the cross, and we see Jesus dying there for us. It's the only way to go, because we've got nothing to lose, and everything to gain.

And when we've discovered this, that it's definitely worth dying for Jesus, then we can go and live with no fear, whatever we face in life.

Let's pray together. Thank you, our God, for sending your son, Jesus Christ. We thank you that Jesus came to die on a cross, so that we might be forgiven, and accepted by you.

We thank you for what Jesus calls us to. He calls us to be prepared to die for him, in this life. And yet losing our life in this world, is only gain for eternity.

And so may each one of us, deny ourselves, and take up our cross, and follow Jesus. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.