

Jesus Talks about His Death – And Ours  
*THE STORY, 291-292*

Mark 8:27-38



"Caesarea of Philip" Capital city founded by Philip the Tetrarch, son of Herod the Great, the same Philip whose wife was later married to his brother Herod Antipas. This city was located in the N part of Palestine, on the S slope of Mount Hermon near one of the main sources for the Jordan River. Caesarea Philippi was about 120 miles from Jerusalem, 50 miles from Damascus, and 30 miles from Tyre. It was first formerly a Canaanite sanctuary for the worship of Baal, possibly Baal-hermon (Judg 3:3; 1 Chron 5:23). It was called by the Greeks Paneas because of its cavern, which had a peculiar similarity to the places dedicated to the worship of the god Pan. In 20 B.C. Herod the Great received the whole district from Augustus and dedicated a temple in honor of the emperor. Philip built up the city and called it Caesarea Philippi to distinguish it from his father's Caesarea on the seacoast.

Look back on page 286. In the court of Herod Antipas various rumors were going around about Jesus: He is John the Baptist reincarnate or resurrected; He is Elijah, He is a prophet like one of the prophets of long ago. Now Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" and they give these same three answers. Then Jesus says, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?"

Peter is often the spokesperson for the whole group of disciples and he responds, "You are the Messiah." Some translations have "Christ," which is the same thing. Again Jesus instructs the disciples not to tell anyone. We will find out why in a moment.

Jesus "began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected . . .and killed . . .and after three days rise again." This is the first

time that Jesus has mentioned his torture and death. Peter, who is not always the sharpest knife in the drawer, gets the implications of this right away. “Hmmm, Jesus is going to be rejected and killed. Hmmm, we are Jesus’s closest companions. Everybody knows who we are . . . Not good; not good at all!” Maybe Peter is mostly concerned about his friend Jesus, or maybe he figures he’ll be next. In any case, he objects.

Jesus objects to Peter’s objection and calls him “Satan,” recalling the temptation scene. Peter, Jesus says, thinks like a human, not the way God thinks. Humans think that a good man, who heals and defeats demons by the power of God can’t be killed by a measly bunch of other humans. And certainly the loyal followers of such a person would be protected by God from danger, right? Wrong! The way God thinks is that evil will ultimately be defeated, not by supernatural power but by being absorbed into Love. The way God thinks is that the anointed Davidic ruler of the world will be enthroned on an instrument of brutal execution. The way God thinks is that Death will be defeated when the Son of God explodes out of the grave, ending Death’s power forever.

The next thing Jesus says proves that Peter was right to be worried. Following Jesus means picking up the instrument of one’s own execution, as Jesus will. Luke adds something interesting to Mark’s summons. While Mark envisions actual physical martyrdom as a consequence of discipleship, Luke has Jesus say, “let them take up their cross **daily** . . .” Self-denial is not merely a matter of giving up something for Lent. To deny oneself in Mark is to repudiate the self-protective self and to identify with Jesus regardless of the cost. The only other place in Mark where the word “deny” occurs is in connection with Peter’s denial. We sometimes say that Peter denied Jesus, but if you read the text closely you see that what Peter denied was that he was a follower of Jesus. He repudiated his true self in favor of saving his physical life. Jesus says that’s the way to lose everything. Better to die than to try to be someone you are not----a person who tries to be independent of the God who created you in the first place. This is a spiritual discipline that indeed has to be done “daily,” as Luke points out.

The Greek and Roman writers believed that to die heroically in battle was to earn honor and avoid shame. Jesus says that if we are willing to embrace his shameful and un-heroic death we avoid the greater shame that comes from having chosen against him.

### Matthew 17/Mark 9/Luke 9 – page 292

Immediately after the teaching about dying in order to live comes the scene called in Christian tradition “The Transfiguration.” The order is not accidental. Peter identifies Jesus correctly as “the Messiah.” Jesus predicts his suffering and death for the first time and Peter rejects this definition of “Messiah.” That’s why Jesus says that they are not to tell anyone. They don’t yet know enough about Messiahship to be talking to others about it. Then Jesus connects his Messianic death with the death that is discipleship. This brings everything together. Jesus has taken control of the definition of what it means to be the Messiah—the powerful miracle-working vulnerable absorber of violence and rejection whose final victory will kill off death forever. It is at this point and only at this point that Jesus can be seen in his full shining glory, discussing with Elijah and Moses his death<sup>1</sup> that is about to take place in Jerusalem. This scene, along with the voice from heaven that reaffirms his baptismal status as God’s “beloved Son” should have convinced the disciples that Jesus’ definition of his role as Messiah is the one that God endorses (“Listen to him!”). It should have, but it didn’t.

### Reflections on Christian maturity

What the Lukan Jesus refers to as denying oneself and taking up the cross daily corresponds to what Paul describes in Romans 6 as being baptized into Christ’s death to sin, with the result that the believer becomes increasingly “dead to sin and alive to God.” This death is necessary because what is wrong with us is not that we engage in bad behaviors (sins). What is wrong with us is that we are addicted/enslaved to Idolatry/Sin. Sin as our slavemaster is killing us spiritually, just as addiction to toxic substances kills people physically. If we want to live, both now and after we die physically, we have to die to the false self. My false self wants to define who I am rather than seeking to be who God says I am. The only way to have real life, present and future, is to participate in Christ’s death and find my life only in Christ’s life.

What kinds of Christian practices might facilitate this death to Sin---the death of the false, self-chosen self? Discuss these suggestions in your group. Some will make sense to some of you and others won’t. Don’t hesitate to say what you think.

- (1) Surrender is a kind of death to self. I give up to Christ all that I claim as mine---my possessions, my relationships, my abilities, my reputation. I

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<sup>1</sup> Luke calls it “his departure” (Greek = *exodus*).

- take my hands off my life and make no further claims, seeking only to be controlled by the Spirit of God.
- (2) Risk for the sake of the gospel is another form of death to self. I listen to God's call to step out of my comfort zone. I readily choose to be with people I don't understand, or people who are very different from me, or people who have reason to be suspicious of me and of the gospel. I listen instead of talk, receive as well as give and make myself vulnerable to being changed.
  - (3) Trust and accountability are forms of death to self. I voluntarily abandon self-protection and self-image and choose to be vulnerable to other Christians. To know others and to be known by others who might have to work hard not to reject me. Self-protection is a kind of idolatry that gets in the way of following Jesus in the way of the cross.
  - (4) The way I respond to humiliation can facilitate death to sin and death to self, or my response can slow down that process. When things happen that make me look bad, whether deserved or not, I can be defensive or I can look for ways to let go of pride and the façade of omni-competence. Instead of making excuses I can admit error and ask for a second chance. I can admit guilt and ask for forgiveness. Defending the false self is not a path to Christian maturity.
  - (5) Generosity is a kind of death to self. Giving 10% or more of my income to Kingdom causes through the church leaves me no option except to trust God. Some people work toward giving away larger percentages--- some as much as 50%- in order to kill off attachment to things and prestige and superficial appearances. Whatever cultural baggage I can leave behind, whatever extra psychological boosts I can jettison in order to have nothing but God can contribute to my maturity.

What other kinds of responses to life can you think of that contribute to being dead to Sin and alive to God?