

Right Side Up

Jeremiah 15:15-21 | Psalm 26:1-8 | Romans 12:9-21 | Matthew 16:21-28

MATTHEW 16:21-28

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

INTRODUCTION

Many of you will know that I have eclectic music tastes, including gangster rap. But you may not know that I also like metal—death metal, German industrial, all of it. Here are lyrics from what many historians consider to be the first Christian rock song:

Have you ever thought about your soul can it be saved?
 Or perhaps you think that when you're dead you just stay in your grave?
 Is God just a thought within your head or is he a part of you?
 Is Christ just a name that you read in a book when you were in school?¹

The band that produced the song was comprised of four Catholic men from Birmingham, England, known as Black Sabbath. The voice that uttered these lyrics on a 1971 album was none other than that of Ozzy Osbourne. And contrary to what many assumed, their songs were not the devil's music, and they were largely not glorifying the demonic. If you read the lyrics, you'll song after song that is warning against hate and war, warning of God's coming judgment, and pushing the listener back toward love. They were realizing, and then trying to point out, that the world in which they lived—the supposedly post-war world that was descending into the madness of Vietnam—was at odds with their foundational beliefs. Heavy metal was a means of expressing this cognitive dissonance, this feeling that the world was upside down. And so, they chose an upside-down way of expressing their message.

As we turn to our Gospel reading, we find a dissonance between Jesus and Peter, a dissonance that shows us something important, Peter's world needed to be turned upside down. He needed to realize the foundational truth of this passage, our Saviour secures victory through sacrifice. Our Saviour secures victory through sacrifice. Let's take a look.

¹ Frank Iommi, John Osbourne, Terence Butler, and W.T. Ward, "After Forever," from *Master of Reality* (1971).

1. CHRIST MUST SUFFER

In the first few verses, we pick up the story where it left off last week. Peter continues in discussion with Jesus, only this time, disagreeing rather dramatically. It was no small matter that Peter had recognized Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed king, the Son of God, in that last passage. And then Jesus went on to tell him that he is Peter, and on this rock, the church will be built.² It was an important moment. But the unwitting nature of Peter's declaration is revealed almost immediately. Fresh from his victory of having gotten the identity question right, he demonstrates that he is utterly wrong about what it means. Jesus had begun teaching that he must undergo suffering and death. This is what the Messiah, the Christ, was meant to do. But Peter couldn't tolerate it. In fact, he rebukes Jesus with rather strong words: "*God forbid it.*"³ Peter and Jesus were living two rather different worlds. Where Jesus had responded to Peter's correct identification with these words: "*For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven,*"⁴ he uses almost the exact opposite phrasing with Peter in this second interaction: "*for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*"⁵

Peter challenges Jesus as though he, Peter, knows better. In Peter's mind, 'Jesus is the triumphant king—Christ the King—the Christ we see here in our window and for whom our church is named. He will overthrow the oppressors and reign in glory. He will restore the fallen kingdom occupied by outsiders. He will storm Jerusalem, not on a donkey but on a royal horse, once again establishing the power of the kingdom of Israel.' And I get it. I'm sure you do to. That's a very attractive notion of Jesus—the one who defeats our enemies and brings us peace and prosperity in this life. It's a very human understanding.

But, and here's the surprise of the story, it's not at all what Jesus came to do. He provides a defeat, but it is of sin and death. He provides peace, but it is peace with God. He provides restoration, but it is of relationship with God, despite our sin, through his sacrifice. It's an upside-down world that Jesus is trying to get Peter and the disciples to see. He didn't come to win a battle, but to be defeated, so that he could win the war. He didn't come to take the lives of his enemies, but to give his own life for his enemies. He didn't come to re-establish the kingdom of Israel, but to die for the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. This is what Peter needed to understand: Our Saviour secures victory through sacrifice.

But this is hard for some people to understand and to accept. They like Christian ethics, but have a hard time with the violence and death at the centre of the gospel. They like the sense of justice we preach, but they find the atonement and blood it requires to be difficult. Or to put it differently, Jesus is a wise teacher all about love, peace, and fairness, not death and sacrifice.

² This is an interesting word play. Jesus's phrasing mirrors Peter's, but Jesus takes Peter's name (Πέτρος), which means rock, and builds the phrase about the rock (πέτρα) on which the church is built. This particular play-on-words points us back to two places earlier in the Gospel: 1) those who follow and do the words of Jesus being like wise men who build houses on rock (πέτρα; see Matt 7:24-27) and 2) the rocky soil (πετρώδης) of the *Parable of the Sower*, which falls away when trouble and persecutions arise (see Matt 13:1-23). This second reference is especially interesting because of the particular persecution that Jesus outlines to Peter (especially death) as Peter reveals himself to be the rocky soil in his rebuke of Jesus and, especially, later in his three denials (Matt 26:69-75).

³ Matt 16:16, 22.

⁴ Matt 16:17.

⁵ Matt 16:23.

But you need to remember: In our upside-down world, the gospel itself is going to look upside down. The Apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthian church, puts it like this:

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.⁶

It is counterintuitive, but that's the gospel. At the heart of it is the Christ, the Son of God, giving up all his rights and privileges—and life—to save those who will believe.

2. FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST WILL ALSO SUFFER

But of course, it's not just Jesus. You see, Jesus does not *just* save his people through his death and resurrection, but he provides the pattern for following him. *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."*⁷ The world must be turned upside down for the disciples as well, for all who will follow Christ Jesus. Following Jesus is the not the comfortable path and it never has been. There is a real cost to following Jesus. And there always has been.

The life of a Christian, of one who truly understands the gospel as taught by Jesus Christ, is a sacrificial one. It's a life of one who is ready to deny themselves—that is set the needs of others above their own, to set the higher good above their own desires—and it is the life of one who is ready to even lose that very life. This, too, is very difficult for some people—even those within our faith. They suggest that 'Christianity is about affirming who we are. It's really about making us feel comfortable.' Not quite. There's very little that's comfortable about denying yourself and picking up a cross for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And to be clear, I'm not suggesting that who you are doesn't matter. That's not what I'm saying at all. But rather, we need to be shaken in our world view. I need to be shaken. I need to be reminded constantly that the way of Jesus Christ, the way of the gospel, is one of selflessness, of self-sacrifice, of giving myself for the sake of Christ and of others—not asserting my rights, but giving them up, not asserting my privileges, but setting them aside, not living in denial, but denying myself, my sinful impulses, and recognizing that I need to be saved. And I need to do all of this, not so I can earn Jesus's approval—no I have that because he already gave his life for me—but so that I can follow him.

CONCLUSION

The world we live in is upside down. Those four guys from Birmingham, Black Sabbath, knew it. One of the early controversies that pushed them to see themselves not as Satanic, but as a warning against Satanism, was the artwork on the interior gatefold sleeve of their first album: an inverted Roman cross. According to later interviews, this upside-down cross was not approved by the band. According to Bill Ward, the former drummer: "But the inside cover, none of us liked. We didn't like it at all because it had an inverted cross in it... I think there were some wise guys who deliberately put that together as a ploy, as an advertising,

⁶ 1 Cor 1:27-28.

⁷ Matt 16:24-25.

promotional ploy, or who had seriously misgauged us as a band.”⁸ But I wonder, given what they were trying to do, I wonder if the upside-down cross might not have been appropriate. While this image became a symbol of the occult in the 19th century, it is actually known as the Cross of Saint Peter, who according to tradition, was crucified upside down at his own request.⁹ I wonder if Peter knew, if he was thinking about this day when his world was turned upside down. I wonder if he was thinking about Jesus Christ, who turned the world upside down—or really, right side up—in showing us the way—not the way of the world’s strength and wisdom, but of the foolishness of the cross.¹⁰

May we follow in his footsteps, denying ourselves, and bearing our crosses, because our hearts have been turned right side up by Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Saviour.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, having found mercy from you in the death and resurrection of your Son, helps us to deny ourselves, pick up our crosses, and follow in his way. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁸ Christina O’Neill, “Bill Ward: Black Sabbath inverted cross was a promotional ploy,” in *Classic Rock*, August 26, 2016. See loudersound.com/news/bill-ward-black-sabbath-inverted-cross-was-a-promotional-ploy.

⁹ The traditions surrounding Peter’s death come from Origen (as quoted in Eusebius, see *Ecclesiastical History* 3.1) and the (apocryphal) Acts of Peter, among other sources.

¹⁰ See 1 Cor 1:18.