

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 16:21-28

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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.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him,
saying, "God forbid it, Lord!
This must never happen to you."

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."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "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.

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?

"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.
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."

This is the second part of the messianic discourse which began in Matthew 16:13. It is a tightly structured story that is not difficult to learn because it is so well constructed and we've heard it a lot. Two verbal threads link this part of the discourse together: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" and "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?" However, this story is not primarily constructed on a web of verbal threads. It is structured by the conversation between Jesus, Peter, and the disciples.

The dynamic of the story is first around conflict between Jesus and Peter. In the immediate aftermath of Jesus blessing Peter, Jesus prophesies his own passion and death. Peter then rebukes Jesus, and Jesus in turn calls Peter "Satan" and rebukes him for his resistance to the prophesy.

The prophesy of suffering and death is a complete reversal of expectations. There is no precedence for this anywhere in the messianic tradition. It is virtually impossible to conceive of a Messiah, an anointed one, being killed and then raised on the third day. The prophesy is delivered as indirect discourse, summarized by the storyteller. But Peter's response is delivered as *direct* discourse and therefore has more dramatic impact on the

audience. His reaction is completely understandable from the point-of-view of anyone who knows the tradition of Israel.

The dialogue between Peter and Jesus is often read in a very objective manner. But it was what we would call a fight. “Rebuke” is a very strong word in Greek. It was unusual for the student or disciple of a rabbi to rebuke his teacher. Peter’s clear intent is to defend Jesus against death; thus, his words need to be spoken strongly. Jesus’ response is if anything even more intense. To call someone “Satan” was both unusual and graphic. Ancient teachers often rebuked their students, but very rarely if ever did a teacher call his student Satan.

Peter’s response is completely believable and sympathetic. He expresses what Matthew assumed would be the response of virtually all of his listeners. In effect, he speaks for the audience, what the audience was thinking. It is probable that Matthew spoke Jesus’ prophecy in a manner that expressed his own surprise and shock of what Jesus was saying. There is no precedent in the tradition of Israel for a prophet or leader of Israel to predict that he would suffer and die in the course of his divinely appointed mission as an anointed one.

In the next episode Jesus gathers the disciples and explains to them what it means to be a follower of him as the Messiah. In the introduction to Jesus’ words—“Then Jesus told his disciples”—the same tone of the storyteller’s surprise is present as described above.

In telling Jesus’ words—“If you want to become my followers...”—you as the storyteller are Jesus speaking to your audience as disciples. A goal of your telling here is to embody Jesus as fully as possible. Jesus’ explanation to the disciples has the tone of information and tough love. It is a description of the cost of discipleship given with compassion on the one hand, and on the other hand as a simple statement of facts.

Jesus’ statement that his followers must take up their cross is another major reversal of expectation. The expectation of a messianic leader in the heroic tradition of the ancient world of Israel was that the leader would say, “Take up your *sword* and follow me.” The words about losing your life in the speeches of antiquity would normally be something like, “You may lose your life in battle, but you will gain glory and honor in killing our enemies.” Jesus does predict that he will be a winner, but it is in an apocalyptic battle against the powers of evil who will be defeated by non-violent acts of love and mercy.