

Cross before Crown

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[0 : 00] Can you remember seeing or watching any of the heralding or the proclamations that Prince Charles was now King Charles III?

Maybe some of you were in Edinburgh on the Royal Mile when it happened, or down in London, but can you remember what that looked like? People dressed in all the kind of royal regalia, trumpets blasting, people with big scrolls, declaring there was a new king.

The announcement of a new king, a very big deal. Well, last week in Matthew, we had confessed that the king has come.

Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the long-promised king of God's people. And I think it's hard for us to imagine kind of just how momentous, how life-changing it was for the disciples to hear those words back in Matthew 16, in Matthew 16, 14 and 15, just a few verses before.

It was kind of one of those, probably for them in the future, do you remember where we were type moments? God's people had been waiting for the Messiah since Eden, and through all the ups and downs of the history of God's people, they'd been made a nation, brought into the land, out again, and now they're under occupation from Rome.

[1 : 26] But there's no king on David's throne, and now they know the long-promised Messiah. He is right here standing in front of them. They can feel his breath on their faces.

The Christ has come. It was a kind of all your dreams come true, but not just your dreams, our parents and parents' parents and parents' parents, all the way right the way back to Adam. For generation after generation, all our parents' parents' dreams come true kind of a moment. So what would you expect to happen next?

What would you expect the king to talk about? The king has come, and the king will do what? He'll build his church in this world. What's next on the agenda? Is it something like, okay, here's how we're going to organize the victory march into Jerusalem.

Here's how we're going to get everyone together as we head to Jerusalem for a coronation and raise the banner that the Messiah has come. Here's how we're going to get everyone together to push God's enemies, the Romans, out and reclaim the land again.

[2 : 31] How are we going to make the palace look plush, and who's all going to be at the coronation feast anyway? What happened when Prince Charles was announced as king?

What sort of thing was read out on the big scroll? There is a new king. And whatever was said, that the next few things spoke about what? How grand it all was. How glorious it was.

It read of his subjects and his realms, who he was king over, and plans were put in place for processions and crowning and feasts and banquets and all those kind of things.

Is that what we have here? Is that what we just read of? No, no. Jesus now opens up for his disciples the greatest surprise and shock that they never expected.

But perhaps the greatest surprise and shock in all of history, that he's the Messiah who is coming to suffer and die. I mean, imagine how it felt for the disciples to hear all this.

[3 : 36] Just a few moments ago, they had heard that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. Death is defeated. And Jesus says, I'm going to suffer and I'm going to die.

We're here to announce the new king, to confess the new king. And he's a king who's come to die. Jesus then is like no other king that has ever lived or will ever live surely.

And what he shows us tonight is that is the way of the king. That that is the way of the kingdom. The pattern of the kingdom is being set here that it is suffering, it is death, but then it is glory.

The way of the king and the way of the kingdom is glory through the grave. The way to life is through death. The way to the crown is through the cross. The way up is the way down.

So really we have two points then this evening. Firstly, Christ's cross before his crown. Christ's cross before his crown. In verse 21, Jesus tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem. [4 : 52] And this is a huge turning point in Matthew. And actually the rest of the gospel is kind of unfolding with this now in view as everything is focused in on going to Jerusalem. And there he must suffer and die and be raised.

And we've said that's a shock to the disciples and we see that, don't we? Because Peter takes him aside in verse 22 there and says what? Far be it from you, Lord. This will never happen to you. I think Peter, in some ways, he hasn't even kind of clocked the raised again part, does he? He's heard suffered, he's heard died and that's kind of enough. This can't be what's happening to you. Now before we go any further, I wonder if you notice a problem there even in what Peter says. Peter calls Jesus what? He calls him Lord. But then what does he do? He tells him what he's going to do. Do servants instruct masters? Are disciples to correct their teacher? Are we to decide what kind of ministry Jesus is going to have, what kind of king he's going to be?

[6 : 02] It is very dangerous ground when we say to Jesus, I know what you've said, but actually I'm going to give you the instructions now, Lord.

When we say, Lord, maybe this, but actually I'm going to do this instead or think this instead. It is very dangerous ground and I guess a warning and a reminder to us all.

But then Jesus goes on, doesn't he? He's speaking with Peter. Peter, and what we have now is the kind of greatest contrast of comments maybe a person has ever received in the space of literally a few seconds.

What does Jesus go on and say to him? Well, what did he say to him before? Moments earlier, Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ and Jesus says, blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah. It's such a glorious thing that's on your lips, the first to confess it.

Wow, look what your heavenly father has shown you. But after Peter's comments, what does Jesus say to Peter? He says, get behind me, Satan.

[7 : 05] You are a hindrance. You are not thinking of the ways of God, but of the ways of man. The Christ must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die and be raised.

That is the way of God. Now, before drawing two applications there, I do want to just bring home a little more the wider arc of this, the principle, cross before crown.

Because Jesus now rebukes Peter, then he calls his disciples to take up his cross and follow him. But look what Jesus goes on to say in verse 27. He says, this is going to happen.

The son of man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his father. And then he will repay each person according to what he's done. So this whole narrative, this whole discourse kind of ends with this arc.

Yes, suffering and death and raised and glory. The son of man is coming. It is an end time picture of glory and judgment. It's the Daniel 7 picture.

[8 : 07] The son of man, Jesus coming in glory. So what are the disciples to see? That Christ's cross must come before his crown.

So dear friends, what does this mean? It means that we do not have biblical Christianity if we do not have a suffering Christ who must go to the cross.

We do not have biblical Christianity if we try and have a form of Christianity that does not have a suffering Christ who goes to the cross. Well, what do I mean?

We spoke a little bit about it last week and we said, look, plenty of people like Jesus. He spoke about Joe Rogan or Jordan Peterson, made him a kind of hero of the history of the West.

Historians have made Jesus a kind of interesting character of the past. Liberal Christians have made him a kind of good moral teacher. There were still plenty people in our country, although fewer, there were still plenty people in our country that in the last census ticked that they were Christians because surely Jesus is nice and what does it really matter all that much?

[9 : 22] Muslims have Jesus as a prophet. But where we do not have the offense and the necessity of a cross, of the suffering Messiah, we do not have Jesus as he gave himself to us and we are setting ourselves upon the things of man and not the things of God.

So our Christianity, our faith, must not only have Christ, the Lord Jesus, right there at the center of it, but it must have a Christ who needs to go to the cross.

Why? Because it's God's plan all along. Do you see that at the end of verse 23? The cross is the way that things have to be. It is God's plan as he seeks to save the world.

So Jesus going to the cross, it wasn't an accident, it wasn't a kind of, oh poor Jesus, stolen from the prime of his youth, 30 something year old man and his life is just shortened by an accident.

It's not a sad kind of accident of history, but at least we have some of his nice teachings left on love. No, right at the heart of the gospel, right at the heart of the Christian message, right at the heart of God's plan in the world, is a Messiah who must suffer and die and be raised.

[10 : 44] But his death on the cross, a substitutionary death where he would go to take our place and pay the price for our sin that we would live. Around 30 or 35 years after the events here where Jesus is speaking with Peter, Peter would write this in his first letter.

Speaking of Jesus, he says this, he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds we have been healed.

By his wounds. There's an old hymn, we used to sing it often in the States and it speaks about lifting high the cross. Dear friends, in every generation, in every generation, there comes around another attempt of Satan to sideline the cross, to attack atonement, to give us a human problem that doesn't need a suffering saviour.

And so we must always be on guard and we must always take the Lord Jesus as he gives himself to us. He is one who must suffer and die and be raised.

Christ's cross before his crown and glory. And now the Lord Jesus turns to his disciples and tells them that his pattern is going to be their pattern too.

[12 : 15] A disciple's cross must come before our crown. Verse 24, then Jesus told his disciples, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Cross before crown for the king. Cross before crown for the disciple. Have you ever wondered what it means to follow Jesus?

Well, Jesus' description of what it means to follow him here kind of couldn't be more straightforward. What is discipleship? It means self-denial, taking up our cross and following Jesus.

Now, this is no small thing, is it? This is no trivial thing. Both the disciples and likely Matthew's first readers would have seen people literally carrying crosses.

Literally carrying crosses through this part of the Roman Empire and would have seen people nail two crosses at the side of the road. And if you saw someone doing that, carrying a cross to their place of execution, what did you know?

[13 : 29] You knew their life was over. It was over. Their life was not their own anymore. Now, for some of these disciples, literally, crucifixion, like Jesus, was their end.

And others would be, would suffer and be killed in other ways. So is this verse teaching that all disciples would literally carry a cross or be killed for their faith?

Well, no, no. But it is teaching that the way of discipleship, the pattern for Christ's people, is self-denial and taking up a cross to follow Jesus.

It is an astonishing message, isn't it? The King is here. I'm bringing my eternal kingdom that death can't destroy and I'm going to die.

I'm going to die that the kingdom might come. And now come and die to yourself as well. Well, why? Why?

[14 : 31] Why would we become like dead men and dead women on the road on a cross to die? Why would we give up our lives and deny ourselves like this? Answer.

Because Jesus wins. Jesus wins and those who are with him win. Those who are with him win.

Those who belong to the church that he's building that the gates of hell cannot destroy win.

Look at the three fours that he's going to speak about here to make the point. Jesus makes the point here by the word four, four, four. What does he say? Verse 25. For whoever would save his life will lose it.

But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. Do you see the paradox here? Do you want to save your life? You want to keep your life?

You'll lose it in the end. You'll lose it in the end. But if you lose your life now, take up your cross now, you'll find your life.

[15 : 34] And again, verse 26. For, Jesus goes on to say, for what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

What's Jesus saying? He's saying, if you want to win in the end, here's how to do it. You want to win in the end? Gaining all the material world isn't how it's going to happen.

It is of no profit to gain this world, to gain this life and forfeit your soul forever. Or he goes on to say, what shall a man give in return for his soul?

Right, nothing. It's rhetorical. There's nothing. There's nothing that can be given. Jesus is saying the eternal destiny of your soul is infinitely, of infinite greater worth than all we can gain in this world.

Lastly, for, for the son of man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his father and then he will repay each person according to what he's done.

[16 : 39] That is, Jesus is bringing judgment and the way to win is to be with the one who is doing the judging, to be with the one who's in charge and who comes.

Be on his side. Be the one who's judged according to what Jesus says, then you'll be with him. But reject the one who is coming, reject the son of man and you'll be on the losing side.

In short, one pastor puts it this way, this is the choice before every single person that's ever lived.

Choose the cross now and you will get the crown then.

But choose the crown now and when Jesus comes you will get the cross then. Many of us here will know the name of Jim Elliot.

Jim Elliot was an American missionary to a tribe in Ecuador in the 1950s. It was a very dangerous task of taking the gospel there. Initially, when contacts had been made, missionaries were always attacked and they pulled out for they knew they could pay with their lives for going there.

[17 : 48] On January the 7th or 8th, 1956, a day or two after they had tried to make contact again with this tribe in Ecuador. Jim Elliot and four others were killed as they tried to take the gospel to this tribe that knew nothing of Jesus.

So why would you go there? Why would you go there knowing you could give your life for that?

Well, Jim Elliot very famously wrote this.

He is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. He is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

Dear friends, this evening, you cannot keep your life. That is what Jesus is telling us. We cannot keep our lives. Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, Bill Gates, men who have come so close to gaining this world, they too will all die and they cannot keep their life.

and so indeed, them or anyone is no fool, indeed is eternally wise to give what they cannot keep to gain eternity with God, something they cannot earn and something they cannot lose.

[19 : 10] And so, dear friends, the Lord Jesus has one invitation to all of us this evening and it is to take up our cross and follow him, to take up our cross now, knowing that we'll have a crown then and not to hang on to our lives and our crowns now, knowing that one day we will see Jesus, we will have a cross, we will have separation and hell as he sends us away.

So, dear friends, one call this evening and it is Christ's call here, take up our cross and follow Jesus. Well, dear friends, perhaps you're here this evening and you've never done that before, you've never trusted the Lord Jesus, then very simply this evening the Lord Jesus calls you to himself and says, come, come to him and receive eternal life.

You can't be too young, no one is too young, no one is too old, the call goes to everyone. I'm not going to tell you it's easy because it's carrying a cross, it's not.

I'm not going to tell you all your problems will go away, it's carrying a cross. They don't. I'm not going to tell you that your life will be plain sailing from here on, it won't, you're carrying a cross.

But I'm going to say that if you've trusted Jesus as your saviour, there is a crown of glory awaiting for you for all eternity, that your sin is dealt with, your soul is safe, and when the Son of Man returns with the angels, you will see him face to face and forever sing of the glory of Christ's cross.

[20 : 44] And you rejoice, you will rejoice that you have taken up yours. And I really do want to press home this evening that the urgency of that if you don't know the Lord Jesus, one day you will see Jesus, you will die and meet him or he will return.

Are you ready for that day? The way to be ready is to repent of your sin, turn from your wrong, and trust the Lord Jesus, the one who went to the cross and suffered and died, that there could be a way to know God again.

Trust him this evening, come to know him, trust Christ in all that he has done, and you will know glory and life. But what about those of us already who are following the Lord Jesus?

What does it mean for us to keep following Jesus and to keep carrying our crosses? Well, let me speak to a few different groups of us this evening first.

And a reminder as we speak about this, the Lord Jesus is with us in all kind of suffering of life, but here he is especially talking about suffering that comes from following Jesus. Self-denial, denying myself, dying to me so that Christ lives in me, going his way.

[22 : 04] So let's speak to a few different groups of us this evening. There might be some of us here this evening, who are weary, who carrying our crosses is hard just now.

It's difficult, we're weary, we're tired. Dear friends, if that's you this evening, keep going, keep going. It is the way of the kingdom that following Christ and denying yourself and taking up your cross and following Jesus is going to be hard. But keep going, keep going, knowing that it is the pattern of the kingdom, knowing that Christ has done it before us, that his spirit's with us and he is with us to the very end as we seek to run the race and fix our eyes on Jesus.

But for some of you, that challenge right now is school. For some of us, it's work or university or our family. But keep going, the crown of glory awaits. Dear friends, I think we are in a church family where so many people are doing this already faithfully, who are counting the cost of following Jesus.

And so let me say to many of us this evening and to us here, just to encourage us, just to encourage us, there's so many people here that are taking up their crosses and following Jesus, that have denied themselves and are counting the cost.

[23 : 30] I think discipleship in this church, to the very large part for most of us, looks cross-shaped. And therefore, it's such an encouraging place to be.

For so many of us in our lives, we are doing this. And so, dear friends, be encouraged and press on as we seek to live this way for the Lord Jesus.

You don't have to be or to go the way of Jim Elliott to carry your cross. It's not just missionaries over there, right, carrying crosses. It's wherever God has you.

And so I want you to be encouraged that I think the Lord is doing that amongst us here. However, for all that's true, I do think we still need to feel that the ongoing challenge and kind of challenge of this.

Perhaps for some of us, we've slipped the Christian life into cruise control. we've slipped it into comfort mode. And this evening then is a reminder for us that following Jesus does cost.

[24 : 39] So I want to ask all of us this evening, is there somewhere in our lives that we're kind of resisting the call to self-denial and going Christ's way?

Again, for some of us that are at school, perhaps we have those choices before us every day. When we're in the playground or a classroom or the lunch hall, I know my friends will laugh and I'll be liked if I go along with this.

But I know that it doesn't please God. I know if I do or say certain things, I'll be in with this group, but I know that's not how Jesus would have me live. Have me live.

Dear friends, know that Christ is with you in those moments. But the encouragement of this passage is to keep trusting and living God's way for his glory and your good and the good of your friends.

Keep trusting him even when it's hard there in school. And for those of you that are younger, if you think temptations and challenges like that that we have at school stop when we're older, they don't.

[25 : 40] So for those of us who are older at work or in our families, wherever it is we're living, has Christ taken every thought captive? Are we choosing God's way and not man's?

In our marriages, our homes, our families, with friends, what things are we saying no to because we must go Jesus' way? Or what things do we have to say yes to so that we go Jesus' way?

Perhaps they bring ridicule. Perhaps they bring scorn, some kind of suffering. But we know that it is the way the Lord calls us to live. Perhaps for some of us it is bigger than that.

Perhaps we're resisting a call to mission work. Because of the cost. Perhaps we're resisting a call to some kind of ministry somewhere. I'm not willing to count the cost.

Perhaps with some of us it might be with our finances or our time or our gifts. But dear friends, ask yourself this evening, where is it we need to think again and ask the Lord to help us to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and follow Jesus, that he would be Lord over our lives.

[26 : 47] And yes, as we make these decisions, there is suffering now. But there is glory then when the Son of Man returns with the angels and returns with the Father in the glory of heaven.

It is a cross now. There is suffering now. But there is glory then. Let me close by reading a little bit of the last ever diary entry of Jim Elliot before he flew off to this tribe and was killed.

Jim Elliot writes this in his diary. I walked out to the hill just now. It is exalting, delicious to stand embraced in the shadow of a friendly tree with the wind tugging at your coattail and the heavens hailing your heart to gaze and glory and give oneself again to God.

What more could a man ask? Oh, the fullness, pleasure, sheer excitement of knowing God on earth. I care not if I never raise my voice again for him.

If only I may love him, please him. It is striking, isn't it? I care not if I may never raise my voice again. If only I may please him, love him. And he didn't raise his voice again.

[28 : 02] Perhaps in mercy he shall give me a host of converts. But if not, if only I may see him, touch his garments and smile into his eyes. Ah then, not stars or converts shall matter.

Only himself. Only himself. Yes, friends, there may be suffering now. There may be self-denial now. There may be a cost to count.

Oh, but to gaze and glory and give oneself to God, is there anything more we could ask? No, no. Because of the greatness and the glory of God who sent the Lord Jesus to save us.

A God who would come to this earth and suffer and die and be raised that with him we might be seated in the heavenly places. What a glorious God we have.

One who would go to the cross for us, who calls us to follow him. So dear friends, no. Yes, cross now. But glory later.

[29 : 04] And one day we shall have the joy and the wonder as all else pales into the background of seeing Jesus us and his holes in his hands, his nail-pierced hands.

The one who died for us. The one who was raised for us. He went to glory for us. And we will enjoy and rejoice with him, seeing him forever. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you so much for the cross. We thank you so much for the cross. We thank you that you are a king like no other. That you are a king when there should have been announcements of parades into the capital and banqueting and feasting and the pushing out of enemies there and you setting up your throne.

Rather there was talk of death. That you are the king who went to the grave. That we might be called sons of God. That you are the king who suffered because our sin was so great.

You came and suffered and died and were raised for us. And so we rejoice and we thank you for the salvation that we have in you and in you alone. And we pray, Lord Jesus, that as we hear your call and as we take up your cross and we follow you, we pray that you would keep us.

[30 : 31] We pray that you would be with us. We pray you would strengthen us by your spirit. And that we would run the race that's before us with our eyes fixed on you. Knowing that yes, there is a cross now. But there is glory and a crown to come.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.