

The Course of the Disciple

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, team. Last time we considered together the call of Christ to Simon, to put out into the deep how it came to him, what Simon needed to overcome to answer it, and what came of it.

And this morning we want to take up the course that this calling sets us upon. What is its nature? What is the shape of the path which shapes us as disciples?

And likely it's true at all times, but it seems dramatically true in our own time that we are in need of a refresher as to our course as disciples.

Let's recognize right out of the gate, it's really hard to stay on course in our calling. To put it another way, it is not an easy task faithfully to fulfill Christ's charge to be in the world, but not of it.

There is such a natural inveterate tendency, I certainly find it in myself, chameleon-like, to take on the color of my context, to conform to my surroundings, to assimilate the character of my setting.

[1 : 50] Now it's not typically deliberate or even conscious on my part. I'm going to absorb a worldly perspective. I'm going to contract a worldly character.

Here I go. No, it's more like swimming around in the ocean. I wonder if you've done this. And discovering that unwittingly I have been taken quite a ways down the beach by the current.

But, Paul likens it to taking on the shape of the world's mold. Like jello conforming to the shape of the bowl.

Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold, he exhorts in Romans 12. And it happens to all of us. And it was happening to the young Corinthian church.

Even on the fundamental issue of what it means to be Christ's disciple, their culture had tugged the Corinthians quite a ways down the beach.

[3 : 00] And Paul writes to help them find their way back to their towels. Reminding them what it means to follow Christ.

And I find that I am just as much in need of such a reminder as the Corinthians were. So our question for this morning, and of our text, is what does it mean to follow Christ in terms of the course that it puts us on?

And I want to answer this critical question by turning to a text in 2 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians 4, and I'll be picking up in verse 7.

So if you have your Bibles, you might want to turn there. I'll try to tether my remarks to the text. Let me read the passage for us. So 2 Corinthians 4, beginning in verse 7.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

[4 : 20] We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken.

Struck down, but not destroyed. Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

So death works, is at work in us, but life in you. Since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what has been written, I believed, and so I spoke.

We also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised our Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.

[5 : 33] For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people, it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God.

So, we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

As we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word, your living word, Jesus Christ, and how he is presented to us in your written word, the scriptures here open before us.

[6 : 44] And thank you that in searching them out to find Christ, you have not left us to our own devices, but has given us the very spirit of Christ in dwelling within us, to illuminate Christ himself, and make him shine before us, that we might be transformed increasingly into his image, to your great delight and glory.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, what is the calling of the disciple? Well, leaping right in, I want to assert that it is first a call to experience death.

A call to experience death. And this may sound jarring, perhaps exaggerated, somewhat extreme, but I assure you it is no attempt at rhetorical inflation.

It is rather, it seems, the frank testimony of the apostle. Take a look at it with me. As he states in verse 11, here we're in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, okay, that's there at verse 11.

He writes, for we who live, that is we who have been made spiritually alive by Christ through the gospel, for we who live, have we been made spiritually alive?

[8 : 16] Then this refers to us, okay? For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake.

Neither is this experience of death a fluke or a random matter. doesn't just happen to be the case, coincidentally. No, it's by design and none other than divine design.

Notice what theologians call or exegetes call the divine passive. Being delivered. Being delivered. Indicated that it is, indicating that it is God who actually delivers us over to death.

death. So this is God's game plan for the disciple. The sovereignly appointed path for the follower of Christ. What is this death to which the disciple is being delivered to?

Well, notice that it is something that transpires constantly. Again, verse 11.

[9 : 33] This death is always happening to the disciple. Indeed, to underscore the ongoing nature of this experience of death, Paul elucidates verse 10 there with a word that conveys the notion of a perpetual process.

Now, not all translations reflect this, but we would better have dying. Better reflects the Greek here. Dying as distinct from simply death.

Caring about in the body the dying of Jesus. And again, worth marking always, always. Not occasionally or under extreme circumstances, rather always.

So, the disciple carries about in the body the dying of Jesus. Have you tended to think of your life in those terms?

So, what do you do if someone asks you? I carry around in my body the dying of Jesus. Well, what does it mean? What does it mean?

[10 : 45] Well, what was the dying of Jesus? Jesus? Well, not simply his death upon the cross, though that was surely the culmination of it.

Rather, it was the whole sweep of his life from Galilee to Galgotha with Gethsemane summing it up. Not my will, but thine. the dying of Jesus was the unrelieved dying to self, the utter and unbroken submission of his will to that of the Father, and the unabating effect upon body and soul of that unwavering devotion.

the hunger, the thirst, the weariness, the homelessness, the abandonment, the betrayal, the false accusations, the flung taunts, the torn flesh, and the cry of dereliction from the cross.

The dying of Jesus was all that it cost him to stay the course of the will of the Father to and through the bitter end.

[12 : 21] What then is it for the disciple to carry about in the body the dying of Jesus? It is the same unrelieved dying to self to stay the course of the Father's will and all the cost to body and soul of never wavering.

It is as it was for Jesus, a martyrdom not confined to the hour of death, but lifelong of spending and being spent, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12, of pouring oneself out as a sacrifice, Philippians 2.

I die daily, says Paul, 1 Corinthians 15. So the shape of discipleship is daily dying, the steady cost of staying the course.

life. But dying in the interest of what? Embracing the steady cost of staying which course?

Well, verse 12 gives us the answer. You see it? So death works in us, but life in you.

[13 : 58] The death that is working out in Paul's life has the correlate of life working in the Corinthians.

Well, how is this so? Well, the suffering that Paul has endured has been the hardship of body and soul required to deliver, to declare, and to display the gospel to the Corinthians, which has brought them new life in Christ.

So death works in me, says Paul, but life in you. Spiritual life for the Corinthians has had its cost. It has cost the apostle the pouring out of his life. concretely, to take a quick tally, as he does in chapter 11, it has cost beatings times without number, thrice 39 lashes, being stoned and shipwrecked, dangers from rivers, robbers, and rogues, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, cold, and exposure.

And that's simply to mention the physical side of the cost, the more harrowing actually being the emotional burden. But as he urged his disciple Timothy, I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, that they may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus, and with it eternal glory.

[15 : 47] 2 Timothy 2.10. Or as he states in our passage, verse 15, for all things are for your sakes. The suffering is simply the cost, as he puts it again in verse 15, of grace spreading to more and more people.

And there is often great cost involved in this great cause. As Jesus would put it, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. so, the dying that marks the path of the disciple, the suffering Paul is talking about here, has here an accent that falls upon a specific suffering.

suffering. We might aptly call it missional sufferings, for it is the suffering sustained in the work of witness.

To carry about in our bodies the dying of Jesus here involves the mortification of mission.

[17 : 27] It is the pain and travail of making Christ known. It is a call to endure in that endeavor.

Now, I believe that the affliction the disciple is called to endure is broader, okay, broader than that suffered in bearing witness to Christ, faithfully seeking to bear his image.

But this is the part that the disciple focuses upon here. So let's for a moment stick to this passage and this accent.

At times, Paul uses what is almost a technical term for this missional suffering as he does in chapter 1 verse 5 of this book, 2 Corinthians, where he writes, the sufferings of Christ or the Messiah are ours in abundance.

Now, this notion of the sufferings of the Messiah or the messianic woes, as some call it, distilled from the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Micah, and developed by Jewish teaching, held that the triumphal messianic age to come would be preceded by woes or intense suffering, akin to the birth pangs of a woman in labor.

[19 : 07] this suffering, and here's the interesting thing, this suffering, the messianic woes, would be endured not by the Messiah himself, but rather born by those associated with him.

And the New Testament writers took this up, a suffering intense, but of fixed duration and even a fixed quantity, that would be the lot of Messiah's people, Christ's disciples.

And they held that Christ's death and resurrection, his ascension, and then his gifts of the Spirit from his ascended right hand of the Father had inaugurated, had begun, the messianic age.

And his people, living now in the last days, were called to endure tribulation in fulfillment of the scriptures and in fulfillment of Jesus' own words until the full measure of this appointed suffering was complete and Christ returned.

So against this conceptual backdrop, we understand what Paul means when he tells the Colossians, Colossians 1 24, I do my share of filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions, or the Messiah's afflictions.

[20 : 45] He is speaking of these sufferings of the Messiah. And notice, fill up, which implies there is a fixed amount, a fixed measure of intense suffering that must be endured by Christ's disciples before he returns.

What is this sum of suffering to be endured? Well, it is the sum of what it will cost to deliver, declare, and display the gospel through the ends of the earth, both near and far.

As Jesus had told his disciples, the gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all nations, and then the end shall come.

And as Paul explains again to the Colossians, I fill up what is lacking in Christ's sufferings, verse 24, by filling up, or fully carrying out, same word, the preaching of the gospel, verse 25.

You see, as disciples, we enter into a partnership in suffering with our master. And that's indeed what fellowship means.

[22 : 15] It means partnership in a cause. The cause is redemption. and the disciple partners with the master in paying the cost.

Both Christ and his disciple suffer to reconcile the world to God, to bring many sons and daughters to glory.

Now, let me be very careful here, because I don't want anyone to misunderstand. We suffer in the same cause as the Savior, but our suffering is not of the same character.

The suffering that our Lord endured to bring many to glory, none but he could bear. He must tread the winepress alone.

He alone took the cup of the Father's wrath. His sufferings were propitiatory.

[23 : 27] The disciples simply propagatory. His the cost of atoning, ours is but the cost of announcing.

His the procuring of a great salvation. Ours merely the proclaiming and parading that great salvation to the ends of the earth.

And yet, though ours is the much smaller part, our part too bears a very real cost. And so fundamental is the disciples' call to take it up, that Paul can unpack what it means to know Christ as having fellowship in his sufferings.

That I might know him Christ, he writes in Philippians 3.10. That is the fellowship of his sufferings. This, then, is the call of the disciple.

The call to partnership in Christ's sufferings. The call to take up a share of the messianic woes.

[24 : 53] The painful birth pains that are bringing his return through helping fully to carry out our gospel mission.

Now, of course, this mortification of mission is not confined to the shores and sands of distant lands. We shouldn't just get that impression. We ought not to think that missional suffering is only about exposure to malaria, snake bite, and akka spears, eating strange foods, and learning hard languages.

No. enduring in the endeavor of gospel witness can find equal expression in New Haven, as in the New Hebrides or New Guinea, among our neighbors at hand as much as among the strangers across the sea.

Gospel grace needs to spread not only to the next continent, but also next door. And faithfulness in witness at home, right here where we are, has a price that needs to be paid.

Even if it's only in terms of some time we would have been inclined to spend to ourselves an extra effort to care and in prayer.

[26 : 28] more. And the mission is not merely to spread grace to more and more people, but also and equally to spread grace through people more and more.

It strives to bring the gospel to bear intensively, not simply extensively, okay, to reach not only every person for Christ, certainly that, but also the whole person.

And indeed to pervade not merely all nations, but also all human thought and culture. As Kuyper loved to pronounce, there is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, mine, mine.

Christ's kingdom must be expressed everywhere. Art, music, science, law, politics, medicine, urban planning, recreation, all of these things.

And this vital truth is communicated in verse 15 of our passage where we discover that the phrase typically translated grace spreading to more and more doesn't quite capture the full meaning which should include the notion of grace being multiplied through many.

[28 : 09] Thus, the idea is that through the disciples' suffering, grace is abounding in depth as well as in extent.

we are all called to take up the cost of what it takes not only that grace get to others but also that grace might grow through others.

I have on my desk Botticelli's depiction of Augustine in his study and he sits there pen ready his eyes are closed in concentration his brow is furled in thoughtfulness and beneath his desk are a score of crumpled up pieces of paper it's my favorite bit the discarded products of the gestation of his laboring mind.

Well this too for some of you scholars this too is caring about in the body the dying of Jesus the mortification of mission the careful thought to clarify truth to articulate it.

So the call of the disciple is a call to come and to die to experience body and soul as the theater of an ongoing death the cost of the grace of the gospel spreading deep and wide until Christ returns suffering and ongoing dying is fundamental to the path of the disciple.

[30 : 10] But there is another theme to the passage critical to complete the picture for the call of the disciple is simultaneously and paradoxically a call to experience life.

A call to experience life. Paul has told us that his dying has produced life in the Corinthians so death works in us but life in you.

But this is not the only place that the dying produces life. The caring about of the dying of Jesus also produces life in the disciple.

Verse 10 Caring about the dying of Jesus that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. Again this death life dynamic is God's design for the disciple. Verse 11 God is the one that delivers over into death in order that the life of Jesus might be manifested in our mortal flesh.

[31 : 30] So just as the great work of the spirit was the incarnation the exhibition of Jesus on this earth so the continuation of the spirit's great work is the further exhibition of Jesus in the life of the disciple.

How does the spirit manifest the life of Jesus in the disciple? By sustaining the dying of Jesus in the disciple.

When the disciple answers the call to come and to die, when she takes up the cross and begins to carry about in her body the dying of Jesus, when he, the disciple, enters into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings.

So costly is the path when followed faithfully, so full of affliction and challenge that sober-minded assessment would put it beyond our powers to endure.

We would falter. we would shrink back. We would fall never to rise. But it is precisely here that the Spirit pours out the treasure of the Christ life into our earthen vessels.

[33 : 11] Verse seven. That we might endure to stay the course. That we might not falter or shrink back.

That we might not fall never to rise. The Spirit infuses the life of Christ so that verses eight and nine though afflicted in every way we are yet not crushed though perplexed we're not despairing though persecuted not forsaken though struck down not destroyed.

The Spirit is poured out to sustain the disciple in the cause. The Spirit does not save the disciple from suffering he sustains her in it.

And the Holy Spirit does so by manifesting in the disciple the life of Jesus. A life of constant mission driven mortification.

As verse 16 expresses that death life dynamic though our outer self is decaying yet our inner self is being renewed day by day.

[34 : 43] But this daily renewal is more than simply strengthening us to sustain the costly path of discipleship.

This renewal is also the inward transforming of the disciple to embrace more fully this path of self giving for the gospel.

so it's not just giving strength for the path but bending her more to that path.

The background and explanation for this inner renewal by the spirit that's here in verse 16 is supplied in the previous chapter chapter 3 verse 18.

But we all Paul writes with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image.

[35 : 48] The spirit's inner work upon the disciple is a transforming work transforming into the divine image. Now when we hear image we ought to think back to Genesis and the debacle of Adam in the garden made in God's image ironically in an attempt to be more like God you

remember he abused and marred God's image he became less like God through self grasping in contrast the one who is the perfect image of God Jesus who did not use the image of God for self grasping you remember 2nd Philippians 2 but for self emptying self emptying and in this Jesus manifests the image of

God fully and we all following Adam are naturally self regarding self grasping but the spirit comes and transforms us from a mockery of the divine image into a manifestation of it to be renewed is to be restored according to the self giving self emptying divine image perfectly exhibited in Jesus so this is what it means for the disciple to have the life of Jesus manifested in his body an abandoned self giving in the cause of the gospel so I ask you do you want to know the flow of Christ's spirit then take up the fellowship of his sufferings give yourself away in the cause of the gospel and there you will experience the spirit's powerful working in you rendering gloriously that self giving life of Christ in your mortal flesh so the call of the disciple is the call not only to experience death but it's the call to experience life our body and soul the theater of the constant sustaining up welling of the self emptying self sacrificing life of Jesus poured out in the cause of the gospel finally how is this death life of Jesus to which we are called how is it nurtured in the experience of the disciple how do we continually embrace it well our embracing it starts with conviction that this is indeed our calling this is the life to which we as disciples of

Jesus are called this is the life that we're beckoned to verse 13 but having this same spirit of faith according to what is written I believed therefore I spoke we also believe therefore also we speak so it is out of this depth of conviction this spirit of faith that we launch out into the deep that we wade into the waters of speaking and suffering for Christ we believe therefore we speak what do we believe what are we convinced of that so impels us we know it says we know that our self emptying is in the sovereign hands of God issuing in spiritual life our own he will raise us up verse 14 and issues in life not only for ourselves but for countless others for whom we have spent ourselves them he will raise up also and present with us verse 14 because we know that our momentary light affliction is producing for us both in us and all around us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison verse 17 because of this conviction we venture out and we venture all if we believe it we cannot remain silent or still we will launch out into the deep waters so

I ask you do you have this conviction is this your world view is this the fabric of your deep belief if so what have you ventured for Christ and his gospel what might you adventure for him where might you launch out into the deep we as disciples of Jesus ought to be giving ourselves away with utmost abandon and not drawback whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it says the master but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels shall save it what kingdom exploit what gospel enterprise can you take up that grace may spread to and through more and more to the glory of our king we're in the midst of a great and needy city we rub shoulders with lost people we are in the midst of a culture drifting farther and farther from a knowledge of

[42 : 54] God will we venture nothing will we not venture all when in the 19th century gold was discovered in the interior of Africa the mouth of the Zambezi river began to swarm with prospectors English missionary C.T.

Stud lamented how few were willing to endure the challenges of Africa for the gospel's sake when the hope of a handful of gold seemed sufficient to bring men out in droves are gamblers for gold so many he said and gamblers for God so few come on let's venture something for Christ for it is as we launch out that the spirit wrought life of Jesus comes into its own and is gloriously displayed do you want the spirit launch out in Jesus name so we nurture this life of the disciple by launching out the venture but alongside the venture must come the view alongside the launching a looking a looking verse 18 while we look not at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen for the things which are seen are temporal but the things which are not seen are eternal the word with which the verse begins might be rendered provided we shall sustain this life of a disciple provided or only as we keep our eyes fixed upon the right things and not fix them upon other things only then shall we endure in the endeavor only then shall we sustain the cost of staying the course what are the things we must not fix our gaze upon the very things we might naturally be inclined to be absorbed with the daily dying and decay the pain the pressure the perplexity the toils the tears the travail we dare not fix our eyes upon the steady cost of staying the course but rather remember that these afflictions that form so much a part of the disciples visible life are but temporary transient ephemeral in the very process of fading away they are the marks of this present passing age and shall soon be no more and since our wasting away is itself fading away it need not receive much

attention since Jesus shall so soon very soon make all things new and wipe away every tear let's not fret over much over them now and even when this world does its worst remember the master's words in this world you shall

have much tribulation Matthew adds they may kill you but and isn't it wonderful that the gospel can add this do they may kill you but be of good cheer but be of good cheer I have overcome the world thus Paul has principally in mind here for things seen the sufferings of this world but by extension all that is as part of this present age passing away is no fit object of the disciples gaze worldly wealth honors ecstasies let's not be diverted from our path by such gilded dross and vanishing smoke we who shall so soon be transplanted ought not to root ourselves too firmly in the soil of this age all the trees of this present world are marked for the woodsman's axe let us rather turn our sights elsewhere and resolve to hold in view things unseen what are these unseen things not what is inherently invisible rather presently invisible the things that will need that will indeed be fully visible at the consummation when

Christ's kingdom comes but now are only partially so the things that are at home in the coming age seen only now in germ in gestation we cannot yet see the full host around the throne in heaven but they are being gathered even now it has not yet appeared what shall be yet we are now becoming what we shall be forever the unseen things are the glorious and everlasting fruit even now in the bud the blossom and the bloom of the light momentary affliction the glory life that when it comes in noontday splendor will have no end as we set and stay our sight on these things the fruit we shall not faint in the fray our sufferings are but the birth pangs of glory however harrowing and horrible they seem in themselves however unlight or unmomentary they seem to feel at the present in comparison to eternity a whole life of utter self sacrifice will seem like nothing but a sleepless night in a bad motel as an old saint puts it though we have a hard breakfast yet we shall have a very good dinner the future display shall be well worth the present decay so let us resolve to set our sights upon things glorious train our view to look on the things everlasting and so press on toward the upward call of the disciple counting all the cost as but dust in the balance of eternity as David Livingstone near the end of his life he a life poured out he confessed anxiety sickness suffering or danger now and then with the foregoing of the common conveniences and comforts of this life may make us pause and cause the spirit to waver and the soul to sink but let this only be for a moment all these are nothing when compared to the glory which shall be revealed in and for us I never made a sacrifice what is the call of the disciple it is a call to experience death to make our body and soul a theater of constant dying for

[52 : 27] Christ's sake in the gospel and it is simultaneously and paradoxically a call to experience life our body and soul the theater of a continuous sustaining and upwelling of the self emptying self sacrificing life of Jesus how is this sustained the venture in the view the launch and the look by stepping out in gospel exploits and setting our sights upon eternal realities amen well team I've gone a little bit over so I fear we won't have time for questions this time but I will try very hard to allow some time next next time we meet which in which we will be talking about the conflicts of the disciple so we'll see you

Lord willing next week do dash upstairs we're a little bit we're a little bit late and sorry for that thank you we'll call we'll see you here at ODAR 100 I like showing up at 8 and I was like man the sign's out it's like