

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

www.meetingwithchrist.com

YOU ARE AN OFFENSE TO ME

Matthew 16:21-23

It was clear to the apostles that Jesus was the Messiah. The notion that He was the suffering Messiah was much harder to digest. It required frequent repetition from Jesus to make real to their minds the thought that their Lord had to suffer and be killed. One of those instances is in Matthew 16. Let's read this passage. Matthew 16:21-23.

Matthew 16:21. From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.

22 Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!"

23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

A divine necessity

The passage begins with the words 'From that time.' This formula indicates that it is a turning point. It was used the first time in Matthew 4:17 where we read, **From that time** *Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'* There it marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in which we saw the Lord progressively emphasizing the truth that He is the Christ. Here in Matthew 16:21, it signals a new phase of His ministry. About nine months before the crucifixion, the nature of His mission was now presented as one of suffering and rejection. Jesus began to point out to the disciples more plainly and clearly than ever before that He was going to be killed and raised again from the dead.

The death of Christ was necessary, as we read in v. 21. *Jesus began to show to His disciples that He **must** go to Jerusalem, and ... be killed ...* The words 'must go' imply a constraint, an imperative, a divine necessity. His death had been planned and willed by God through all eternity. The prophets had predicted it and He must fulfill it.

The nature of His suffering is not clearly spelled out but we know where it would come from: The elders, the chief priests and the scribes. These three groups of leaders made up the Sanhedrin, Israel's supreme court. Christ was to be officially executed. Notice that opposition did not come from the people at large. It came from the religious leaders, the very people who should have been the first to recognize and rejoice in the arrival of the Messiah. As with so many in every generation, they were blinded by their own religion.

A stumbling block to the cross

Jesus spoke both of His death and His resurrection, but it was the suffering and death that stayed in the minds of the disciples. This is clearly seen by Peter's reaction. Having just confessed his belief in Jesus, Peter found it totally repulsive and unacceptable that the Savior would soon be put to death. So he 'took Jesus aside' – *proslambano*. The Greek is strong. It means 'caught hold of.' Peter took hold of Christ. He grabbed Him aside for a talk.

Note also that Peter *began to rebuke* Jesus. This again is strong. It is not just a desire but a forcible attempt to stop the idea of the suffering Messiah. He said, *God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You*. Peter tried to stop Jesus. In a sense, he objected to the cross. He opposed the cross. 'Let this never happen to you. God forbid that You should go to the cross. God forbid it. Never!'

At that moment, Peter became an enemy of the cross and Jesus declared him as such. He said, *Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me*. The word 'Satan' means 'enemy'. 'Get behind Me, my enemy. You are my enemy because in what you are doing right now, you are opposing Me. You are standing between Me and the cross. You are an enemy of the cross.' If Jesus had said, 'Get behind Me, Peter,' it would have been bad enough. But we don't find the word 'Peter'. We read, *Get behind Me, Satan*. And those words were addressed to Peter.

Notice this. Peter believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God, but he could still be an enemy of the cross, a stumbling block to the cross. He opposed Jesus. He opposed His ministry, His cross, and therefore was Satan to Christ, i.e., an enemy to Christ.

The offense of the cross

Peter found the cross offensive because he could not bear the thought that the Messiah, from whom he expected national deliverance, should be killed. That would have put an end to all his hopes concerning the Messianic reign. Therefore his reaction is quite understandable.

But listen to this. What is less obvious is that after the resurrection, the cross can still be offensive to those who believe that Jesus is the Christ. Let me read to you Galatians 5:11. Paul wrote these words.

Galatians 5:11. And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased.

Remember that Paul was writing to the Christians of the churches of Galatia, not to non-Christians. They did believe in the death and resurrection of Christ. But the cross could still be an offense to them. Do you see the amazing situation here? I can believe that Jesus died for me, and yet, somehow the cross can still be an offense to me. Why? We understand why Peter was offended by the cross. But why would a Christian, after the death and resurrection of Christ, be offended by the cross?

In the letter to the Galatians, the offense of the cross is linked to the problem of circumcision. Paul warned the Galatians that if the cross is an offense to them, then they are going to be in big trouble. He said, 'I do not preach circumcision. Because if I were to preach circumcision, the offense of the cross would be removed. But you accept the circumcision because the cross is an offense to you. And if the cross is an offense to you, Christ will be no good to you.' Let's read what Paul wrote a few verses earlier. Galatians 5:2-4.

Galatians 5:2. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing.

3 *And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law.*
4 *You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.*

‘You who want to go back to circumcision because you find the cross offensive, you have cut yourselves off from Christ. You have fallen away from grace.’

Paul is saying here that if the cross is going to be an offense to them, if they turn away from the cross to circumcision, they will be severed from Christ. This was a strong warning to the Galatian believers.

There is a verse in 1Corinthians where Paul says that to some people, namely the Jews, the message of the cross is an offense. *But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness* (1Corinthians 1:23). To the Jews a stumbling block, an offense. This is the same word as in Matthew 16:23. Why was the crucified Christ of such great offense to the Jews? For the same reason that Peter found offensive the idea that Jesus had to die. The Jews thought that the Messiah would be a conquering king who will restore David’s throne in a temporal way. It was inconceivable to them that He should die at all. And besides, He had been executed like a criminal. How could a criminal be their Savior?

It was predicted

The Jews, through their whole sacrificial system, were quite familiar with the concept of someone or something dying for someone else. They saw the substitutionary death of animals on a regular basis and they knew that their Savior had to die in the same way for the salvation of the nation. Every Jew has read Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53, as you know, is a prophecy about the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow. Like a lamb at the slaughter, He bore His sufferings with an exemplary patience. In so doing, He made atonement for the sins of man and opened the way for salvation. Israel knew that salvation would come from someone who will experience death.

In Luke 22:37, the Lord Jesus said this. *"For I tell you, that this which is written must be fulfilled in Me, 'And He was numbered with transgressors'; for that which refers to Me has its fulfillment."* Jesus was citing Isaiah 53:12. His point was that He is the Messiah and He will die a shameful death between criminals as anticipated by the Scripture. You see, this had already been prophesized. So why should Christ’s crucifixion be a stumbling block to the Jews?

Or take another example. In Zechariah 12:10, the prophet Zechariah wrote, *So that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born.* ‘They will look on Me whom they have pierced. This evidently refers to the rejection of Christ and their crucifying Him. The Jews knew that the Messiah is a person that they will pierce. So I ask the same question. Why didn’t they see in Jesus their Savior?

Remember Jesus’ reply to Peter. V. 23: *Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.* Notice those words. *You are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.* That was Peter’s mistake. It was also the mistake of all the Israelites. They set their minds upon ‘the things of human beings’ rather than upon ‘the things of God.’ Their focus was on what comes naturally to the human mind when presented with the idea of power and authority which the title ‘Messiah’ suggests. This prevented them from seeing things from the perspective of the kingdom of heaven. If they had set their mind on the will of God, they would have made room for the necessity of the suffering and death of Jesus. They would have seen that the Messiah’s purpose was to deliver humanity from the effects of sin, not to deliver Israel from the Roman oppressors.

Circumcision vs. the cross

And you know, it is possible for the Christian to make the same mistake. It is possible for the Christian to find the cross offensive. How can that happen? This is a good question.

Look again at Paul's letter to the Galatians. Galatians 6:12.

Galatians 6:12. Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

Think carefully on these words. There were people among the Galatians who found the cross offensive and so they preached circumcision. 'They want you, Christian Galatians, to be circumcised so that they may not be persecuted for the cross.' These people preferred to preach circumcision rather than the cross of Christ in order to avoid persecution. And Paul said, 'I am being persecuted for the sake of the cross of Christ because I do not preach this kind of circumcision' – the circumcision in the flesh.

Now, why should circumcision be opposed to the cross? Circumcision, in this passage, symbolizes everything that has to do with external religion. The cross is objectionable to people who trust in external things, who trust in the flesh. It is objectionable to the natural man who, remember Matthew 16:23, 'is not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.'

But where is the offense? Here I am thinking back on the days when I was a non-Christian. When I heard somebody preach on the cross, I cannot say that I was offended. It may be a problem for someone with a Jewish background, but it was not a problem for me. I had no conception of a Messiah. To hear that Jesus died for my sins was not offensive at all. In fact, far from being offensive, I found the message of the cross very moving, that Christ should die for me in such a cruel manner. But why did Paul talk about the offense of the cross? In what way can the cross constitute an offense?

The offensive aspect of the cross

Notice what Jesus said after Matthew 16:23, after calling Peter, Satan. Matthew 16:24.

*Matthew 16:24. **Then** Jesus said to His disciples, If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.*

The connecting word 'then' is very important. 'Then' what? Then follows from what has just happened. This connection between v. 23 and v. 24 comes out even more strongly in the parallel passage in Mk 8:34 where instead of the word 'then' we have the word 'and', showing that the passage goes straight on.

When Peter opposed the cross, then, Jesus told His disciples, *If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.*

Do you see the offense of the cross now? The offense of the cross lies not in our believing or not in the cross of Jesus Christ. It lies in our taking up the cross. The cross becomes an offense when Jesus says, 'You, take up the cross and follow me.' Why is that an offense? If our mind is set on the things of men rather than the things of God, we will find the cross offensive because the natural man does not want to die. And if the cross is going to lead him to his death, he will stay away from it.

You see, the cross was not only for Jesus. The cross of Christ means your death and my death. This is the part that is hard to digest.

In Galatians 6:14, the apostle Paul wrote, *But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Paul said, 'I am not going to boast about anything, except one thing.' What is that one thing? The cross of our Lord Jesus. But notice what the cross does to him. It crucifies him), *by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*. The world has been crucified to me and I am crucified to the world. That's what the cross does. Jesus died for me so that I die with Him. I am crucified with Him. That is the offensive part.

Let us go on to the next verse, Galatians 6:15. *For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation*. What is the connection between v. 14 and v. 15? The connection lies in the words 'a new creation'. To become a 'new creation' means to be born again. Now, how can I be born again if I have not been crucified, if my old self has not died? And how can I be crucified with Christ if the cross is an offense to me? How can I be crucified with Christ if I don't follow Him to the cross? We do not just believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. The other part of the truth is that in our believing we have to take up the cross and get crucified with Jesus.

Transformed into rock through crucifixion

I would like to conclude by referring to our previous lesson. We studied the words of Jesus in Matthew 16:18 where He said, *You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church*. Jesus is building His church on the rock. We defined the rock as the divine character. It is primarily God. But it is also that secondary foundation of people that constitutes the church. If these people are to be rocks, then they must be transformed into rocks, into the divine nature, into participants of the divine nature. And how do we become participants of the divine nature? Through the cross. That's what we just read in Galatians. It is through the cross that we are crucified to the world. And having finished with the old way of life, we then become a new creature. Circumcision counts for nothing. Uncircumcision counts for nothing. The only thing that counts is a new creation.

Remember this. We are saved by a faith that makes us to become a new creature through the power of God. But there is an offensive aspect to the process. We will not become a new person unless our old person has been crucified with Christ. We have to be willing to take up the cross and die with Him. Jesus says in that same passage, 'Except you lose your life, you cannot gain your life' (Matthew 16:25). The only way to save your life is through losing your life. The only way to become a new creature is to be crucified with Christ.