

The Fastest Man Alive

It took less than ten seconds for Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt to cover the one-hundred-meter distance on the Olympic track and win the gold medal in London in 2012. Those few seconds cemented his status as the "fastest man alive" and placed him on the winner's podium once again. But the race was not won in those seconds—it was won by hours and hours of practice, workouts, weightlifting, special diet, and coaching.

The race was not won in the performance but in the preparation. It is our desire for something greater that causes us to sacrifice some things, even some good things, for the sake of things that are better. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him.

Right before today's story, Jesus complimented Peter. He asked His disciples "Who do people say I am?" "Who do you say I am?" Peter gave a great answer: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." At that moment, Peter, led by the Spirit, confessed his faith in the Lord. Peter and the other disciples understood that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. However, they didn't know what all of that meant.

After letting His disciples know that He is the Messiah, He teaches them about His suffering, death, and resurrection. In the Gospels, he talked about these three times. Each time he spoke about suffering and death, he also spoke about the resurrection, which the disciples could not understand at all until then. But the disciples could not understand that He would have to die. The idea that the Messiah would die was incomprehensible to the disciples. In their mind, the Messiah would conquer the Romans and save Israel from them. The disciples could not accept as their Messiah someone who is powerlessly punished and died. They thought that the Messiah should be the ultimate victor and would rule the world.

Coming from this understanding, Peter responded to Jesus when He said He would have to die: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." In verse 22, it says that Peter took Him aside and began to "rebuke" Him. This

word is a Greek word, "Epitimaō." It refers to criticizing or rebuking others. In Mark 1, Jesus used this word when he rebuked and cast out demons.

It was like this, "Lord, never. Don't talk non-sense! Stop talking about dying!!" When Peter was told that Jesus would die on the cross, he opposed him with a strong tone of rebuke. He was objecting that the prophecy cannot be fulfilled if the Messiah dies. He said it this way because he didn't understand the work of God, i.e. God's plan for salvation.

Peter couldn't conceive of Jesus' death and what's beyond it. He didn't know about the ultimate victory over sin and death. But Jesus said that He first needed to be on the cross in order to save the sinners. Only then He would conquer death and come back to life to lead His people to the path of life. We sometimes don't understand God's Word. In such times, we complain. We complain about our circumstances, about people around us, and eventually to God too. "God, why are you doing this to me?" But we complain this way because we don't understand God's plan for salvation and His works.

When Peter opposed Jesus, Jesus rebuked Peter. Verse 23 says, "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus did not call Peter Satan, but he was speaking to a spiritual being who was influencing Peter's thoughts. Spiritual beings cannot be seen by human eyes, but the Bible talks about them all the time. Again verse 23 says, "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." We need wisdom here; we sometimes think of God's work, and sometimes we think about the work of the flesh. Of course, God knows we need our daily bread.

But in our busy lives in this world, there are times when we do not think about God's work and only think about my work, my plans, and my thoughts. Jesus says in verse 24, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Deny yourself, take up your cross, and then follow Jesus!

To modern people living in the 21st century today, it sounds very difficult to deny oneself. Following Jesus means disowning the self and giving allegiance to him instead. Self-denial is not just a periodic practice. We are not

sometimes called to bear a particular cross. We are called to a whole way of life. It is about our willingness to follow Him at all costs.

The first thing Jesus did when He went to Jerusalem was to cleanse the temple. He cleansed the temple which was filled with worldly things, full of greed and desire, although people proclaimed to love God. What would this mean to us?

According to the Scripture, the hearts of those who receive Christ as their Savior are called the temple. Your and my hearts are the temple of God! To be His disciples, rather than mere spectators of His, we need to plow our hearts. An uncultivated land cannot become fertile. Without proper plowing, the land will inevitably invite weeds. A fertile land is plowed repeatedly. A once fertile land does not remain fertile unless stones and weeds are taken out repeatedly.

Sacrificial Love

Maria Dyer was born in 1837 on the mission field in China where her parents were pioneer missionaries. Both her parents died when Maria was a little girl, and she was sent back to England to be raised by an uncle. The loss of her parents, however, did not deter her young heart from the importance of sharing the gospel. At age sixteen she, along with her sister, returned to China to work in a girl's school as a missionary herself. Five years later, she married Hudson Taylor, a man well-known today for his life of ministry, faith, and sacrifice.

Hudson and Maria's work was often criticized—even by other Christians. At one point Maria wrote, "As to the harsh judgments of the world, or the more painful misunderstandings of Christian brethren, I generally feel that the best plan is to go on with our work and leave God to vindicate our cause." Of their nine children, only four survived to adulthood. Maria herself died of cholera when she was just forty-three. But she believed the cause was worthy of the sacrifice. On her grave marker these words were inscribed: "For her to live was Christ, and to die was gain."

In a day when many are self-absorbed and care more about what they can get rather than what they can give, we need a renewal of sacrificial love. It was God's love for us that sent Jesus into the world to die for our sins, and it

is that kind of giving love that our world needs so greatly today. When we love God as we should, our interests fade as we magnify Him.

Dear beloved, Jesus invited his disciples to deny themselves, bear the cross, and then follow him. He also invites us today. Please don't forget this. Jesus did not only speak of suffering and death, but also promised resurrection and eternal life. I don't know about you but I certainly believe that! That life does not begin later when you die, but Jesus promises to be with those who follow him now and forever. Fairfield Grace, may God's grace, peace, goodness, and mercy be with you, with your family, with your business, with your studies, and with the lives of your children. Amen.