

IT IS JUST NOT FAIR

Poor Peter! He had just recognized Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of the Living God (Matthew 16:16). But his expectation of the Messiah was a great show of power and mighty works. To all of this, Jesus gave a resounding, "NO!" It is just not fair! Peter's standards of success were dashed. When Jesus told him "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."(Matthew 16:21), Peter declared "God forbid it!" Suffering and death were not in Peter's messianic plan. They were, however, Jesus' divinely appointed agenda. Now what is fair?

Wouldn't it be easier if God just followed our ideas of fairness? We would be spared so much misery and misunderstanding. Or would we? God intervenes over and over again to show us that we are incapable of saving ourselves from the tangled webs we weave for ourselves and others. We believe in God, but do not trust God. So we become preoccupied with ourselves. Our own success or security become our standard of salvation and spirituality. God's way to save us is Jesus' suffering on our behalf. To follow Jesus, then, is to follow a crucified Jesus.

When Jesus goes on to speak to Peter of self-denial, He is NOT talking about the sort of piety that keeps an accounting of good deeds and rules not broken. That is called self-righteousness. It leads to an over-inflated view of one's self. When Jesus speaks of self-denial, He is NOT talking about self-condemnation, either. That results in our minimizing our value altogether. Self-denial means knowing who we are, who God created us to be and means for us to be. No pretense or falsehood. In other words, Jesus' notion of self-denial means sacrificing whatever it takes to have a focused relationship with him and a willingness to go where He leads. This relationship with Jesus holds the promise, not of a way of suffering and death but of His presence with us. We can chain ourselves to hopes

and expectations limited by human standards, or we can receive the benefits of Christ, participate in the struggle to make real the Kingdom of God on earth, and discover true love and life. That struggle is self-denial.

People want to know that He exists. They want to prove that existence beyond a shadow of a doubt. But that proof would not in the long run, I think, answer the fearful depths of our need at all. For what we need to know, of course, is not just that God exists, not just that beyond the brightness of the stars there is a cosmic intelligence of some kind that keeps the whole show going, but that there is a God right here in the thick of our day-by-day lives who may not be writing messages about himself in the stars but who in one way or another is trying to get messages through our blindness as we move around down here knee-deep in the fragrant muck and misery and marvel of the world. It is not objective proof of God's existence that we want but, whether we use religious language for it or not, the experience of God's presence! That is the miracle that we are really after. And that is also, I think, the miracle that we really get. It is not fair! We do not DESERVE a God that loves us so much that He walks with us daily. But that is the divinely appointed agenda.

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