

# Jesus the King: Understanding the Life and Death of the Son of God,

by Timothy Keller

## CHAPTER TWELVE THE RANSOM

Jesus does not leave any doubt about what he came to do: He came to die. He tells his disciples repeatedly that this is the case. In fact, by the time of the incident that Mark records below, Jesus has already predicted his death twice: first in Mark chapter 8 after Peter had said, “You are the Christ”:

*[Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this. . . . (Mark 8: 31–32)*

Then again in chapter 9:

*Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” (Mark 9: 30–31)*

But just in case the disciples (or we) have missed it, Jesus repeats it in chapter 10:

*They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. “We are going*

*up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.” (Mark 10: 32– 34)*

This time, Jesus gives us more details about his death than he had previously. For the first time, we are told that his death will be in Jerusalem, and that both Jews and Gentiles will reject him. Chapter 8 speaks only of the Jewish religious leaders, and 9 speaks more generally about being delivered into the hands of “men.” In chapter 8 he had said he would be “rejected” by the priests and scribes, but now he reveals that they will “condemn him to death.” This legal term indicates that he will be tried and executed within the criminal justice system. His depiction of his final days also becomes more graphic and violent: They will “mock . . . spit . . . flog” him.

Jesus predicted his death three times in just three chapters— he knew his death was not incidental to his mission. Rather, it was absolutely central to both his identity and his purpose on earth. But the major advance in Mark 10 is that, for the first time, Jesus tells us not only that he will die but why he will do so:

*“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)*

Jesus Christ came not to be served but to die, to give his life. That sets him apart from the founder of every other major religion. Their purpose was to live and be an example; Jesus’s purpose was to die and be a sacrifice.

Jesus’s choice of the word *come* is a strong giveaway that he existed before he was born: He came into the world. By saying “did not come to be served,” he assumes that he had every right

to expect to be honored and served when he came, though he did not exercise that privilege.

The final phrase, “to give his life as a ransom for many,” sums up the reason why he has to die. Jesus came to be a substitutionary sacrifice. Consider the little preposition *for* in the phrase “a ransom *for* many.” In Greek it’s the word *anti*, which means “instead of,” “in place of,” “substitute.” What about *ransom*? In English we don’t even use that word nowadays except in relation to kidnapping. But here it translates a Greek word, *lutron*, that meant “to buy the freedom of a slave or a prisoner.” The ransomer would make a huge sacrificial payment that matched the value, or paid the debt of the slave or the prisoner in order to procure his or her freedom.

Jesus came to pay that kind of ransom. But since the slavery he is dealing with is of a cosmic kind— that is, cosmic evil— it required a cosmic payment. Jesus is saying, “I will pay the ransom that you couldn’t possibly pay, and it will procure your freedom.” The payment is Jesus’s death on the cross.

## A Willing Sacrifice

This will be hard for you if you’re among those who struggle with the Christian teaching about the cross. It’s natural to assume that the Bible is giving us one more example of those ancient, primitive, bloodthirsty gods worshiped by those ancient, primitive, bloodthirsty societies. In *The Iliad* by Homer, for example, Agamemnon didn’t get fair winds to Troy until he sacrificed his daughter. That appeased the wrath of the gods, and then they let him go to Troy. What Jesus says in Mark may seem to be just another variation on that theme: a savage ancient culture, ruled over by an irritable god, demanding blood sacrifices for the release of innocent slaves and prisoners.

But that’s not what’s going on here at all. And why not, you may say? If God is really a loving God, why doesn’t he just

forgive everybody? Why did Jesus have to go through suffering into death? Why did he have to be a ransom?

Here’s the beginning of an answer: Jesus didn’t have to die despite God’s love; he had to die *because* of God’s love. And it had to be this way because *all life-changing love is substitutionary sacrifice*.

Think about it. If you love a person whose life is all put together and has no major needs, it costs you nothing. It’s delightful. There are probably four or five people like that where you live. You ought to find them and become their friend. But if you ever try to love somebody who has needs, someone who is in trouble or who is persecuted or emotionally wounded, it’s going to cost you. You can’t love them without taking a hit yourself. A transfer of some kind is required, so that somehow their troubles, their problems, transfer to you.

There are a lot of wounded people out there. They are emotionally sinking, they’re hurting, and they desperately need to be loved. And when they are with you, you want to look at your watch and make a graceful exit, because listening to them with all their problems can be grueling. It can be exhausting to be a friend to an emotionally damaged person. The only way they’re going to start filling up emotionally is if somebody loves them, and the only way to love them is to let yourself be emotionally drained. Some of your fullness is going to have to go into them, and you have to empty out to some degree. If you hold on to your emotional comfort and simply avoid those people, they will sink. The only way to love them is through substitutionary sacrifice.

Or think of an even more dramatic example— parenting. When you have children, they’re in a state of dependency. They have so many needs; they can’t stand on their own. And they will not just grow out of their dependency automatically. The only way that your children will grow beyond their dependency into self-sufficient adults is for you to essentially abandon your own independence for twenty years or so. When they are young, for

example, you've got to read to them and read to them—otherwise they won't develop intellectually. Lots of their books will be boring to you. And you have to listen to your children, and keep listening as they say all kinds of things that make for less than scintillating conversation.

And then there's dressing, bathing, feeding, and teaching them to do these things for themselves. Furthermore, children need about five affirmations for every criticism they hear from you. Unless you sacrifice much of your freedom and a good bit of your time, your children will not grow up healthy and equipped to function. Unfortunately, there are plenty of parents who just won't do it. They won't disrupt their lives that much; they won't pour themselves into their children. They won't make the sacrifice. And their kids grow up physically, but they're still children emotionally—needy, vulnerable, and dependent. Think about it this way: You can make the sacrifice, or they're going to make the sacrifice. It's them or you. Either you suffer temporarily and in a redemptive way, or they're going to suffer tragically, in a wasteful and destructive way. It's at least partly up to you.

All real, life-changing love is substitutionary sacrifice. Remember Lily Potter, the mother of Harry Potter? In the first book of the series, the evil Lord Voldemort tries to kill Harry, but he can't touch him. When the Voldemort-possessed villain tries to lay hands on Harry, he experiences agonizing pain, and so he is thwarted. Harry later goes to Dumbledore, his mentor, and asks, "Why couldn't he touch me?" Dumbledore replies that "Your mother died to save you. . . . love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign. . . [but] to have been loved so deeply . . . will give us some protection forever." 51 Why is Dumbledore's statement so moving? Because we know from experience, from the mundane to the dramatic, that sacrifice is at the heart of real love. And we know that anybody who has ever done anything that made a difference for us— a parent, a teacher, a mentor, a friend, a

spouse—sacrificed in some way, stepped in and accepted some hardship so that we would not get hit with it ourselves.

Therefore, it makes sense that a God who is more loving than you and I, a God who comes into the world to deal with the ultimate evil, the ultimate sin, would have to make a substitutionary sacrifice. Even we flawed human beings know that you can't just overlook evil. It can't be dealt with, removed, or healed just by saying, "Forget it." It must be paid for, and dealing with it is costly. How much more should we expect that God could not just shrug off evil? The debt had to be paid. But he was so incredibly loving that he was willing to die in order to do it himself.

That's where the God of the Bible is most radically different from the primitive gods of old. The ancients understood the idea of the wrath of God, they understood the idea of justice, the idea of a debt and a necessary punishment, but *they had no idea that God would come and pay it himself*. The cross is the self-substitution of God. That possibility would not have entered into Homer's imagination in a million years, let alone the imagination of Jesus's disciples.

The only way that Jesus could redeem us was to give his life as a ransom. God couldn't just say, "I forgive everybody." In the creation, God could say, "Let there be light," and there was light. God could say, "Let there be vegetation," and there was vegetation. God could say, "Let there be sun, moon, and stars," and there were sun, moon, and stars (Genesis 1). But he couldn't just say, "Let there be forgiveness." That's simply not the way forgiveness works.

God created the world in an instant, and it was a beautiful process. He *re-created* the world on the cross— and it was a horrible process. That's how it works. Love that really changes things and redeems things is always a substitutionary sacrifice.

C. S. Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* puts it like this: "When a willing victim who had committed no

treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward." 52

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN THE CUP

The Greeks and Romans have left us many stories of leaders and heroes as they faced death, and without exception these people were calm and dispassionate in their final hours. Think of Socrates, who was condemned to drink hemlock as a means of execution. The story of his demise has him surrounded by his followers, coolly tossing off ironic one-liners. By contrast, in Jewish literature such as in 1 and 2 Maccabees, you'll see that when Jews wrote accounts of the deaths of major figures and heroes they did not make them cool and removed like the Greeks; rather, they are shown as hot-blooded and fearless, and they praise God as they are being sliced to pieces by their persecutors. Nothing in either of these traditions— indeed nothing in ancient literature— resembles the portrayal that Mark gives us of Jesus's final hours as he faced his death. Mark records:

*They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James, and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mark 14: 32–36)*

Here Jesus, just before his execution, opens his heart to his disciples, opens his heart to God, opens his heart to the readers of Mark's Gospel, and lays bare his struggles, his agony, his fears about facing death. He turns to God and pleads, "Is there a way this cup can be taken from me? Is there any way I can be let off the hook? Is there any way I can get out of this mission?" Up to this point Jesus has been completely in control. Nothing seems to have surprised him so far. Jesus always knows what's going on: Nothing seems to jar him. But all of a sudden we read that "he began to be deeply distressed." The Greek word translated "deeply distressed" actually means "astonished." Think back on the Gospel of Mark up to this point. Jesus has been totally unflappable. But here, suddenly, something he sees, something he realizes, something he experiences, stuns the eternal Son of God.

Jesus is also, according to the text, "troubled." The Greek verb here means "to be overcome with horror." Imagine you're walking down a street, you turn a corner, and there in front of you is someone you love, mutilated in a terrible car accident. What do you feel? Nausea. Your horror is like a physical cloud rising up to choke you. That emotion is what Jesus is experiencing. He says so: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."

Jesus's struggle is not only unique in ancient accounts of the death of prominent figures, but it is also almost unique in church history. That's strange, isn't it? We have many true accounts of Christian men and women being killed for their faith—thrown to wild animals, cut to pieces, burned at the stake. It appears that many of them faced their deaths more calmly than Jesus did. Take Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, an early Christian leader. Near the end of his life, he was taken before a magistrate and told that he would be burned at the stake. The magistrate said, in effect, "I will give you one more chance: You can reject Christianity, you can recant, and avoid execution."

Some witnesses wrote down Polycarp's reply: "The fire you threaten burns but an hour and is quenched after a little. . . . You do not know the fire of the coming judgment. . . . But why do you delay? Come, do what you will." 61

Or take Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer, who were burned at the stake for their faith in Oxford, England, in 1555. They were tied side by side, and when the fire was lit at their feet, Latimer said: "Be of good comfort Master Ridley, and play the man: we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England, as I trust shall never be put out." 62

Why is it that many of Jesus's followers have died "better" than Jesus? Of course, he must have been facing something that Polycarp, Ridley, and Latimer were not facing, something that none of the other martyrs were facing.

Something happened in the garden— Jesus saw, felt, sensed something—and it shocked the unshockable Son of God. What was it? He was facing something beyond physical torment, even beyond physical death—something so much worse that these were like flea bites by comparison. He was smothered by a mere whiff of what he would go through on the cross. Didn't he know he was going to die? Yes, but we're not talking about information here. Of course he knew that; he had told the disciples so repeatedly. But now he is beginning to taste what he will experience on the cross, and it goes far beyond physical torture and death. What is this terrible thing? It's at the very heart of Jesus's prayer here. He says, "Take this cup from me."

Remember that in the Hebrew Scriptures, "the cup" is a metaphor for the wrath of God on human evil. It's an image of divine justice poured out on injustice. For example, in Ezekiel 23: 32– 34, we read, "You will drink . . . a cup large and deep; . . . the cup of ruin and desolation, . . . and tear your breasts." Similarly, in Isaiah 51: 22, God speaks of "the cup that made you stagger; . . . the goblet of my wrath." All his life, because of Jesus's eternal dance with his Father and the Spirit, whenever he turned to the Father, the Spirit flooded him with love. What happened visibly

and audibly at Jesus's baptism and at his transfiguration happened invisibly, inaudibly, every time he prayed. But in the garden of Gethsemane, he turns to the Father and all he can see before him is wrath, the abyss, the chasm, the nothingness of the cup. God is the source of all love, all life, all light, all coherence. Therefore exclusion from God is exclusion from the source of all light, all love, all coherence. Jesus began to experience the spiritual, cosmic, infinite disintegration that would happen when he became separated from his Father on the cross. Jesus began to experience merely a foretaste of that, and he staggered.

### **The Wrath of Love**

Here you may say, "I don't like the idea of the wrath of God. I want a God of love."

The problem is that if you want a loving God, you have to have an angry God. Please think about it. Loving people can get angry, not in spite of their love but *because* of it. In fact, the more closely and deeply you love people in your life, the angrier you can get. Have you noticed that? When you see people who are harmed or abused, you get mad. If you see people abusing themselves, you get mad at *them*, out of love. Your senses of love and justice are activated together, not in opposition to each other. If you see people destroying themselves or destroying other people and you *don't* get mad, it's because you don't care. You're too absorbed in yourself, too cynical, too hard. The more loving you are, the more ferociously angry you will be at whatever harms your beloved. And the greater the harm, the more resolute your opposition will be.

When we think of God's wrath, we usually think of God's justice, and that is right. Those who care about justice get angry when they see justice being trampled upon, and we should expect a perfectly just God to do the same. But we don't ponder how much his anger is also a function of his love and goodness.

The Bible tells us that God loves everything he has made. That's one of the reasons he's angry at what's going on in his creation; he is angry at anything or anyone that is destroying the people and world he loves. His capacity for love is so much greater than ours— and the cumulative extent of evil in the world is so vast— that the word *wrath* doesn't really do justice to how God rightly feels when he looks at the world. So it makes no sense to say, "I don't want a wrathful God, I want a loving God." If God is loving and good, he must be angry at evil—angry enough to do something about it.

Consider this also: If you don't believe in a God of wrath, you have no idea of your value. Here's what I mean. A god without wrath has no need to go to the cross and suffer incredible agony and die in order to save you. Picture on the left a god who pays nothing in order to love you, and picture on the right the God of the Bible, who, because he's angry at evil, must go to the cross, absorb the debt, pay the ransom, and suffer immense torment. How do you know how much the "free love" god loves you or how valuable you are to him? Well, his love is just a concept. You don't know at all. This god pays no price in order to love you. How valuable are you to the God of the Bible? Valuable enough that he would go to these depths for you.

A correspondence between C. S. Lewis and a man named Malcolm has been collected in a book called *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. In one letter Malcolm said that he was uncomfortable with the idea that God gets angry. He found it more helpful to think of God's power and justice like a live electrical wire. He said, "The live wire doesn't feel angry with us, but if we blunder against it we get a shock." Lewis replied: "My dear Malcolm: What do you suppose you have gained by substituting the image of a live wire for that of angered majesty? You have shut us up all in despair, for the angry can forgive, but electricity can't. . . . Turn God's wrath into mere enlightened disapproval and you turn his love into mere humanitarianism. The 'consuming fire' and the 'perfect beauty' both vanish. We

have, instead, a judicious headmistress or a conscientious magistrate. It comes of being high-minded. . . . Liberalizing and civilizing analogies can only lead us astray." 63 Your conception of God's love— and of your value in his sight— will only be as big as your understanding of his wrath.

### **The Obedience of Love**

When the circumstances of life are giving you the desires of your heart, you're content. Suffering happens, we might say, when there's a gap between the desires of your heart and the circumstances of your life, and the bigger the gap, the greater the suffering. What do you do when that gap gets too wide? One response is to change the circumstances— to get off the path that's taking you into suffering. Of course, sometimes this is the right response; our present circumstances may really have to change. There may be a very unhealthy relationship that needs to be ended or put on a different course, or a medical condition that needs to be treated aggressively. We should not accept all circumstances with passive fatalism.

Many people have a pattern, however, of dealing with almost any suffering by getting out of town, breaking promises, pulling out of relationships. They invariably try to go someplace where their desires are satisfied, because they consider their desires all-important, which makes their circumstances negotiable. They are willing to do practically anything to avoid suffering. The problem is that life circumstances rarely oblige. Try that new set of circumstances and in six months you'll need another set.

The Eightfold Path of Buddhism doesn't advocate that response, and neither did the ancient Stoics; they say that always avoiding suffering has no virtue or integrity at all. To say, "When there's a gap between your desires and your circumstances, change the circumstances" violates the teachings of these and

other currents of religious thought. Instead, they say, what you do need to do is suppress your desires. Get on top of them and become cool, detached, and dispassionate. Then you can keep your promises and stay on the path. The circumstances are fated, while the desires are just an illusion. That's the reason Socrates wasn't panicking at the end of his life. He didn't care to keep on living. He had succeeded in detaching himself.

Of course, there are times when we need to suppress our desires, because they're so often destructive. But to eliminate all desire is to eliminate our ability to love; and God made us to love.

When you look at Jesus here in the Garden of Gethsemane, he appears to be taking the first approach. He's certainly not taking the way of detachment; he's pouring his heart out. He's undone. And he's honestly and desperately asking God to change the circumstances, praying "that if possible the hour might pass from him." He cries out, "Abba, Father . . . everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me." He's contending with the Father, asking him for a way out, asking for another way to rescue us without having to go personally under the flaming sword.

But look closely: He's actually not taking his circumstances into his own hands. In the end, he's obeying—relinquishing control over his circumstances and submitting his desires to the will of the Father. He says to God, "Yet not what I will, but what you will." He is wrestling but obeying in love.

It would still be possible, at this eleventh hour, for Jesus to abort his mission and leave us to perish. But he doesn't consider that as an option. He's begging the Father to carry out the mission some other way, but he doesn't ask him to abandon it altogether. Why? Because as horrible as the cup is, he knows that his immediate desire (to be spared) must bow before his ultimate one (to spare us).

Often what seem to be our deepest desires are really just our *loudest* desires. Do you know how, especially when you are in intense pain or great temptation, you just can't think straight?

You turn on the people who love you. You make shockingly self-destructive decisions. You say and do things that you know are not only hurtful but actually undermine the people and values you love most.

But at one of the supreme moments of personal pain in the history of the world, Jesus doesn't do that. He says, "Yet not what I will, but what you will." He's not even saying to God, "I think you're wrong, but I'm going to let you win this one." No; he's saying, "I trust you no matter what I'm feeling right now. I know that your desires are ultimately my desires. Do what we both know must be done."

And in so doing Jesus is absolutely obedient to the will of God. *Yet not what I will, but what you will.* Jesus is subordinating his loudest desires to his deepest desires by putting them in the Father's hands. As if to say, "If the circumstances of life do not satisfy the present desires of my heart, I'm not going to suppress those desires, but I'm not going to surrender to them, either. I know that they will only be satisfied, eventually, in the Father. I will trust and obey him, put myself in his hands, and go forward."

Jesus doesn't deny his emotions, and he doesn't avoid the suffering. *He loves into the suffering.* In the midst of his suffering, he obeys for the love of the Father—and for the love of us.

And when you see that, instead of perpetually denying your desires or changing your circumstances, you'll be able to trust the Father in your suffering. You will be able to trust that because Jesus took the cup, your deepest desires and your actual circumstances are going to keep converging until they unite forever on the day of the eternal feast.

In a great sermon, "Christ's Agony," Jonathan Edwards put it like this:

*[In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus] had then a near view of that furnace of wrath, into which he was to be cast; he was brought to the mouth of the furnace that he might look into it, and stand and view its raging flames, and see the*

*glowings of its heat, that he might know where he was going and what he was about to suffer. . . . There are two things that render Christ's love wonderful: 1. That he should be willing to endure sufferings that were so great; and 2. That he should be willing to endure them to make atonement for wickedness that was so great. But in order to its being properly said, Christ of his own act and choice endured sufferings that were so great. . . . [it was] necessary that he should have an extraordinary sense how great these sufferings were to be, before he endured them. This was given in his agony. 64*

That love— whose obedience is wide and long and high and deep enough to dissolve a mountain of rightful wrath— is the love you've been looking for all your life. No family love, no friend love, no mother love, no spousal love, no romantic love— nothing could possibly satisfy you like that. All those other kinds of loves will let you down; this one never will.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN THE SWORD

C. John Sommerville, professor emeritus of history, currently at the University of Florida, carried out an exercise over several years with his students. He challenged his students to the following thought experiment: Imagine you see a little old lady coming down the street at night, and she's carrying a great big purse. It suddenly occurs to you that she's very little and very old, and it would be incredibly easy just to knock her over and grab the purse. But you don't. Why not? There are two possible answers. The answer of the shame-and-honor culture is that you don't do it because it would make you a despicable person,

unworthy of respect. It would dishonor your family or your tribe. People would despise you for picking on the weak. You would despise yourself for picking on the weak. It wouldn't be strong—and it's critical that strength is respected. That approach, Professor Sommerville would point out, is self-regarding. You are thinking almost entirely of yourself and your tribe—about honor and reputation.

There's a second train of thought that would keep you from taking the purse. In the second train of thought, you would imagine how painful it would be to be mugged and how hard it would be for the woman if she depended on the money in her purse and it were taken from her. You ask yourself, "If I mug her, what will happen to her, and what will happen to the people who depend on her?" All else being equal, you want her to have a good life, so you don't do it. That's an other-regarding ethic—utterly different from the moral reasoning of a shame-and-honor culture. Having walked through these scenarios, Sommerville would ask his class, "All right, how many of you would take the purse?" Of course nobody would take it. Then he asked, "But why not? Which train of thought is yours?" And virtually everybody claimed the second train of thought.

Then he would make this observation to them: You may not realize it, but the idea that you put the other person ahead of yourself rather than thinking of yourself first, comes from Christianity. Your morals have been shaped by Christianity. Sommerville continued:

*An ethical system based on honor is a self-regarding ethic, while one based in charity is an other-regarding ethic. . . . With honor goes a concentration on pride rather than humility, dominance rather than service, courage rather than peaceableness, glory rather than modesty, loyalty rather than respect for all, generosity to one's friends rather than equality.*

Sommerville goes on to say that the ethical system based on shame and honor was the system that dominated many civilizations before Christianity arrived. He then adds, “Students only have to see this comparison on the blackboard to realize how Christian their moral orientation still is.” Even though his students are very critical of the church and Christianity, “to give up Christian standards would leave [them] with no basis for [their] criticism.” In effect, his students, in all their rants against Christianity, are “really asking for more of it, or a purer strain.”  
65

What are these distinctly Christian ideas that still have such power to shape our own consciences and imaginations today?

All through the book of Mark—and all through Matthew, Luke, and John, too—Jesus is constantly talking about “the kingdom of heaven,” “the kingdom of God,” and also about “the kingdom of this world.” A kingdom is an administration— that is, a way of ordering things and getting things done. For example, when a new coach comes to a team, there’s a new administration. Or a new boss joins your department— that’s a new administration. A new administration means things are different now; there’s a new order for getting things done, a new set of assumptions and goals. What often distinguishes one administration from another is its list of values. The list is headed up with the things that really count; and in the middle would come things that are not so important. At the bottom, you would find things that are disdained or avoided. That’s what makes the difference in how things are done. With a new administration, you begin to reorder your values, your goals. The old order of things is abolished, a new order of things is instituted, and the way it’s done is according to the list, whether or not the list is even written down.

If administrations and kingdoms are basically a matter of a list— which things are on the top, which things are on the bottom—then to order the list is, at some level, to order reality.

Of all the texts in which Jesus contrasts the kingdom of this world with the kingdom of God, the most succinct is in Luke 6. There, Jesus gives us two lists:

*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.*

*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*

*Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you. . . (Luke 6: 20– 22)*

*But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.*

*Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.*

*Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.*

*Woe to you when all men speak well of you. (Luke 6: 24–*

*26)*

Biblical scholar Michael Wilcock, in his study of this text, observes that in the life of God’s people there will be a remarkable reversal of values: “Christians will prize what the world calls pitiable and suspect what the world calls desirable.”  
66 The things the world puts at the bottom of its list are at the top of the kingdom of God’s list. And the things that are suspect in the kingdom of God are prized by the kingdom of this world. What’s at the top of the list of the kingdom of this world? Power and money (“ you who are rich”); success and recognition (“ when all men speak well of you”). But what’s at the top of God’s list? Weakness and poverty (“ you who are poor”); suffering and rejection (“ when men hate you”). The list is inverted in the kingdom of God.

## The First True Revolution

These two kingdoms, these two administrations of reality, these two sets of priorities and values meet dramatically in the Garden of Gethsemane:

*Just as Jesus was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. The men seized Jesus and arrested him. (Mark 14: 43–46)*

The term *kiss of death* came into our English vocabulary from this incident. If you look it up in a dictionary, you'll see that the phrase means an intimacy with something that subsequently causes your destruction. The problem is not that Judas is intimate with Jesus.

Intimacy with Jesus is always the kiss of life, never the kiss of death. Judas's problem is that he's intimate with swords and clubs. Why doesn't Judas just walk up to Jesus and say, "There he is, arrest him"? What's the kiss for? Why all the subterfuge? Was he expecting that Jesus would be armed with swords and clubs too? After all, Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, and any new kingdom had always used money, politics, military might, or some combination of these to get into power.

How does the King react to this kiss and to his arrest? Mark records:

*The men seized Jesus and arrested him. Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs*

*to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled." (Mark 14: 46–49)*

Judas seems to be expecting armed resistance, otherwise he and his squad wouldn't be coming in this fashion. Jesus responds, "Am I leading a rebellion that you'd have to come with firepower and deception to capture me?" The word translated *rebellion* means a guerrilla movement that is using violent tactics (the sword) to overthrow the existing order of things and bring in a new order—a revolution. Jesus is saying, "If you come at me with swords, because you think I will retaliate with the sword, it shows you don't understand me at all. The kingdom of God is different from the kingdom of this world."

What Judas and those with him do not understand is that Jesus is indeed leading a revolution, but it is a different kind of revolution, and a much greater one than history has ever seen. What happens in the kingdom of this world is that revolutions basically keep the same old thing on top of the list. They're not real revolutions; money and power and politics always stay at the top. Most revolutions have been merely a fine-tuning of the same old order. Every revolution brings a new set of people into power, and then the next one puts a different set of people in power. But Jesus isn't just putting a new set of people in power; he is bringing a totally different administration of reality—the kingdom of God. Jesus is not a revolutionary you can stop with swords, because he's not about the sword at all. Judas doesn't get it.

But Judas is not the only one who doesn't get it. We read that when Jesus is arrested "one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear." In the Gospel of John we're told it was Peter—which figures. Peter knows about the kingdom of God. He has heard Jesus's teaching about it over a period of years. Yet when push comes to shove, what's his instinct? Pull out that sword.

Aren't we kind of like Peter? We say we're on the side of justice, of peace, of fairness; but when a challenge arises, we feel for the sword hilt. We merge the kingdom of this world— sword on top, then money, power, success, and recognition—into our philosophy, whether it's Christianity or something else. We settle for the kiss of death. We're exactly like Peter.

To Peter and to all of us, Jesus is saying, "My kingdom is not of this world. It's completely different. This is how I'm going to change things: I'm going to put others ahead of myself. I'm going to love my enemies. I'm going to serve and sacrifice for others. I'm not going to repay evil with evil; I'm going to overcome evil with good. I will give up my power, my life. Weakness, poverty, suffering, and rejection will now be at the top of the list. My revolution comes without the sword; it is the first true revolution."

### **The Inversion of the Revolution**

What do you think the disciples did as Jesus was arrested and was being led away by this armed and dangerous mob? Mark writes:

*"Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled." Then everyone deserted him and fled. A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind. (Mark 14: 48-52)*

"Then everyone deserted him and fled." Peter and the other disciples, who had spent years by his side, desert him at the first real test of their fortitude. One young man is so intent on

saving his skin that when Judas's crowd grabs hold of his garment, he is willing to shed it and run away naked down the street. In the Bible, nakedness is a sign of shame and disgrace, and it's perfectly appropriate in this case: This man's an absolute coward, so the shame of running home naked suits the occasion. Some scholars say this is the author Mark himself, who would have been a young man at the time; if so, he's saying, "I was there and I was as bad as everybody else." Everyone has failed Jesus.

By recounting this young man's naked flight from the garden, Mark may be reminding us of another garden. In the Garden of Eden, too, there were people who were given a test, and they failed. They were exposed as naked and fled in shame. Centuries later, another garden and another test, and everybody fails in one way or another. They're either waving swords around or fleeing in naked shame.

But wait a minute—something is different. In the middle of *this* garden there's someone who is passing a test. Why are all the other people fleeing and failing? Their only reality is the world's sword. They're afraid somebody is going to arrest them, kill them, or start a revolution that will remove them from power. But Jesus is standing firm, and he's facing something even worse than the world's sword. Remember that when Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, they turned around and saw the flaming sword of justice, keeping them from ever going back. Their sins separated them from God. There's no way back into the presence of God unless someone goes under the sword of divine justice. Jesus was in the garden facing the ultimate sword of divine justice, and he stood firm, for Adam and Eve, for me, for you.

Do you know why some people call the kingdom of this world "the right-side up kingdom" and the kingdom of God "the upside-down kingdom?" The world's emphasis on power and recognition seems right-side up and natural, while Jesus's approach of service and sacrifice seems totally impossible and

unnatural. For example, it's unnatural biologically— who ever heard of the survival of the weakest?

The kingdom of God also seems unnatural psychologically. When you hear Jesus say that he prizes weakness, poverty, suffering, and rejection, you say, "That's masochism. It's psychologically unhealthy. It's impossible to live like that."

And guess what, it *is* kind of impossible to live like that.

When you see Jesus caring for the poor, forgiving his enemies without bitterness, sacrificing his life for others, living a perfectly loving and perfectly sinless life, you say, "I can't do that." You're right— you can't. Jesus Christ as only an example will crush you; you will never be able to live up to it. But Jesus Christ as the Lamb will save you.

On the cross, Jesus is getting what we deserve so we can get what he deserves. When you see that this great reversal is for you, when you see that he gave up all his cosmic wealth and came into our poverty so that you could be spiritually rich, it changes you.

Say there's a person living completely in the values of this world and another person who is learning to belong to the kingdom of God, and each of them has a great job. Both suddenly learn they are about to lose their job, and they know they are likely never to recover that socioeconomic status. In the kingdom of this world, this feels like the end of your life. The kingdom of this world teaches you to base your identity on status, money, and power. Without them your identity is gutted. If you play by the rules of the kingdom of this world, you might do anything to keep your job. Maybe even lie or cheat or stab others in the back. But if you're starting to get rooted in the kingdom of God, you know losing your job is not going to be easy or pleasant, but you have learned that when weakness and suffering, poverty and rejection are near, the kingdom of God is near. It's the time when you come to grips with your real treasure, your identity.

Christians are free to take or leave money, power, recognition, or status. How? These things at the top of the kingdom of the world don't have to control them the same way anymore. When you understand what Jesus has done for you, it frees you. When you realize that you are made righteous by His grace and not by your achievement, and that you are loved in Jesus Christ, it changes the way you look at power, money, and status; they don't control you anymore.

If you're trying to save yourself, trying to earn your own self-esteem, trying to prove yourself, you'll either hate money or power too much or love them too much. For example, you may say you don't like money and power and don't like people who have them. Staying away from them makes you feel noble. In that case, you're basically a self-saver. Or perhaps instead you desperately *need* money and status, for the same reason: You're a self-saver. You may despise other kinds of self-salvation more than yours, but you're basically doing the same thing in a different way. But if you know you're a sinner saved by sheer grace, you can take it or leave it. You're free. If money or power comes, there's a lot you can do with it. But if it starts to go, you know that's one of the ways the power of God's kingdom is going to work in your life. The sword is exiting from your life. The compulsion is dissipating. You work, but your work does not define you. You work, but it's not driving you into the ground. And you're going to be content, you'll almost look reckless. People will say, "How can you spend your money like that? How can you let that career opportunity go by? How can you be involved with such a needy person when you know she will probably take advantage of you?" A Christian can respond, "It's not the end of the world if somebody takes advantage of me, or if my money is gone, or if my career doesn't develop as I might like. I'm not controlled by that fear anymore." You are replacing the kingdom of this world with the kingdom of God.

In Daniel, Belshazzar, is having a wild party, an orgy, and doesn't know that an army is on the march to sack the city and

kill him that very night. But in the midst of the party, a hand appears and starts writing on the wall. The message says, "Your days are numbered."

If you're living for yourself, spending all your money on yourself, striving for power, focusing on your success and your reputation, you may be having a wonderful party, but according to the Bible, that kingdom is going to be inverted. The days of that kingdom are numbered.