

Good morning. The past three weeks have been difficult for me personally on a lot of levels. So much for me just got flipped upside down on Thanksgiving. And it's not just that our pastor is going through the most significant trial of his life, but he's a dear friend. I've just been wrestling with all of this, and it's just been pressing in on me and forcing me to ask questions that I don't usually ask. And if I could label where I've been, I've had just a little bit of a crisis of belief, a crisis of faith. Now I don't mean that my faith has been unraveling, but I'm just reevaluating it. My faith hasn't been crumbling before me; I've actually pressed in and asked my own heart harder questions, dealing with the reality of life and with the situation that I find myself in, that my friend and my pastor finds himself in. I'm dealing with these at a different level. It's new for me. I have not walked through a season like this. So because of that, I'm actually pressing in and asking harder questions of my own faith. And if you're like me, these same things are happening in your life. You might be asking difficult questions, questions like, "Why? Why not this way? Why this way? Why are You doing it like this?" And we're confused and we have frustrations maybe. I really think the question of "Why?" undergirds so much of where we are and what we're thinking. So you might be walking through a similar crisis of belief. It's not that your faith is unraveling, but you're honestly reevaluating some things. Maybe this is forcing you to press in at some levels that might be uncomfortable for you, that might be foreign to you, that might be new to you.

I have a friend who is a pastor in St. Louis who has been sending me messages daily, whether Scripture, prayer or a quote or something. I got one yesterday that was a quote from Hudson Taylor. It says, "When the pressures of life begin to hem you in, don't let those pressures get between you and the Lord. Rather, let that pressure press you into the Lord." And I think that's where I've been. This hasn't become something that has been a splinter in my relationship with the Lord; it is causing me to press in at a new level. Because my own comfort level is more like snorkeling where I can just stay on the surface and see down there and go, "Man, that's really pretty. That's really deep down there. I bet that's amazing down there. But I can see just fine from here." It's just safer. I can come up for air at any minute. But the Lord is kind of saying, "You're going to strap on that scuba gear, We're going to put that weight belt on you and force you down. And when you're down here, although scary and a little bit out of control to you, it's alright in My sovereign hand. And you will see things down here that you will never see as you skim across the surface. And so Josh, I'm forcing you down." It's hard and it has not been easy for me, but I trust that the Lord is going to show me some sweet mercies that I had no idea about before.

And so I want to jump into a text, Matthew 16, because I think Jesus is going to press into His disciples here, and He's going to get to the heart of the matter. Let's pick it up in verse 13. It says this, "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar- Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ."

You see, Jesus walks into this region of Caesarea Philippi, which is just about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was a place that was at the center of Baal worship, which was an idolatrous worship of a false god named Baal. It was pagan

worship. And then it moved to a worship of a Greek god named Pan. And then came Philip the Tetrarch and Caesar Augustus, both of whom deemed themselves to be gods. So Philip the Tetrarch renamed the region after both himself and after Caesar Augustus. If you walked around in this area today, you'd see the ruins of a temple built for the worship of Caesar. There are caves that you can go down into and scan all of the different idols that have been erected to the Greek god Pan. And so Jesus, looking at all the false gods that call out to the allegiance to His people and all people, says this question, "Who do people say that I am? As you kind of scan this scene, who do people say that I am? As you walk through the markets, who do people say that I am?" And that question is kind of a safe question. They answer Him. They say, "Well, some say John the Baptist, Jeremiah, Elijah or one of the prophets." And those are great answers. Of John the Baptist, Jesus said, "There has been no greater man born of woman than John the Baptist." He was the forerunner of Christ. What a great pedigree, right? That's a good answer, but it's just wrong. Then you have Jeremiah who is called "the Weeping Prophet," the one who poured out his life for the nation of Israel, calling her to repent and return to the living God. Over and over and over again, like a stone wall he was rejected the vast majority of his ministry. Jeremiah is who was called forth from his mother's womb. He was a great man of faith and a great prophet, but he was not the Messiah. They mentioned Elijah, the one who called down fire for those prophets of the false god Baal. Elijah sees the Lord do great and mighty things. He had such an intimate relationship with God Almighty. It was a good guess but just the wrong answer. And then they just throw in the blanket statement "or one of the prophets," which just gives an indication of what those around were thinking about Jesus. They didn't know. They had messianic hopes, but they just didn't know what it was going to look like.

And He takes that question, which was wide and inclusive, and He zeros it right in to His disciples. He says this, "But who do you say that I am? I have walked with you, I have taught you and you have seen Me do miracles. I hear the word on the street, but who do you say that I am?" That's just a poignant question. It's one that just cuts right to the chase, right to the core. It's a question that I have to deal with and you have to deal with at some level in our lives. What everyone else is saying about Jesus is one thing, but He turns it in and the light shines on me and you with, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter responds. Peter responds for the group and gives this confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus, in this moment, does not say to Peter, "Peter, that is over the line. That is taking it too far, Peter. I am not that. I'm good, but I'm not that good." Jesus says to Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Notice what He's doing here. He says, "Blessed are you, Simon Peter. You're not blessed because you give this confession. The very essence of who you are is blessed because My Father has revealed something to you." He says, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!" Simon Bar-Jonah translates to "Son of Jonah." Jesus calls into reference his earthly father and says this in contrast, "Your earthly father didn't give this to you. You can't get this from earthly fathers or mothers. They can point you in the right direction, but this confession, what you just said has to be granted from God on high. You are blessed because He did. You're blessed because you have said that I am Christ, the Son of the living God."

Peter says two things in this confession. The first is when he identifies Jesus' work and the second is when he identifies Jesus' person. He says, "You are the Christ." Christ means "anointed one" or "Messiah," the long awaited hope of Israel. He's saying, "You are the One the prophets have foretold of. You are the One who fulfills all promises." The book of Hebrews says that all of the promises of God are "yes" in Christ. "You are our 'yes.' You are the Christ. You are the One who has come to redeem and set free God's people." And what Peter did not know but would soon find out is what it meant to be the Christ, the Anointed One of God, and it is this: He would suffer, die and rise again. And we know what Peter did not know at that time, that the death of Christ would be the act of God on behalf of humanity where He makes a way. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin that we might become the righteousness of God. In the death of Christ, you and I have the opportunity to be redeemed, reconciled and ransomed and set free to the glory of God, our sins forgiven, walking out of shame and darkness into His marvelous light. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." He identifies His person. "You are Jesus, God's Son. You are the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity." And notice

what he says, "You are the Son of the living God." As they are in the backdrop of all the dead and false gods of Caesarea Philippi, he's saying, "You are not like these gods. You are the Son of the living God, the God who is now awake, present, living and active. You are His Son. You are uniquely different, there is no one like You and there will never be another like You. Because of who You are, You are able to do what You do. Your work is sufficient because Your sonship is secure. You are Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God."

It is a profound confession. In fact, He says this, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." So Peter confesses the confession that any of us and all of us that are in the church have confessed. It is our present-day confession. So Peter boldly walks out and begins to preach and proclaim this in Acts 2, first to the Jews at Pentecost, then to the Samaritans in Acts 8 and then to the Gentiles in Acts 10. Peter proclaims this message and then hands off the baton to a man named Paul. Paul took that message that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and he took it to the nations. And Paul told somebody who told somebody who told somebody who told somebody who told a guy named Tom Bailey who told me when I was 19 years old. I had heard it a thousand times before from flesh and blood, but the Father had never revealed it to my heart. I walk into this man's house and he says to us, "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God," and the Father blessed me that I might confess. And I walked out of that house with the understanding and the realization, although shallow and so new, that He is the Christ, that He is the Son of the living God. And since that day, my life has forever been changed by that. It hasn't been free from suffering, it hasn't been free of hard times, but it is secure in knowing that He is the Sovereign who reigns and the Savior who redeems and loves me. He's the Christ, the Son of the living God. And somebody told somebody who told somebody who told your parents who told you, "He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He can do for you what I cannot. My hope and my desire is sure in Him, and He is your hope." And the Father blessed you and you made a confession that He's the Christ, that He's the Son of the living God. If you're a member of God's church, somebody told somebody who told somebody who told your coworker or your neighbor or your pot luck roommate or your friend who told you that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

So if that's our confession, if He is indeed the Sovereign and the Savior who redeems and loves, now what? If that's what we believe, what then does He teach us to do? Look with me in verse 20. "Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ." Let me try to explain why He did that. It's not that He didn't want the world to know; it was that His disciples did not yet understand. It was not that He did not want the message of hope and redemption to go out; it was that His people did not understand who the Messiah was, what the Messiah was going to do and how the Messiah was going to accomplish it. So He is about to shift and take time to teach and train His disciples. This is a shift in Jesus' ministry. And for many of us, this is going to be a shift in the way that we usually think about life and faith. If you've ever just had that paradigm shift, if you've ever had the table just flipped upside down, that's what Jesus is about to do.

Natalie and I dated all throughout college. For our first Valentine's Day in 1999, we were seven months in and I knew that I needed to do something right. I needed to do something good for this Valentine's Day. So I planned it and got it all ready and right. I went and picked up Natalie, and it was weird, but I said, "Hey, do you mind putting on this blindfold while I drive you around?" She trusted me and so she did. And we end up going to my dad's house. I had two other college roommates who all did the same thing. We show up at the house and there's a candle lit dinner waiting with food we had made personally with our hands. We gave them instructions not to say a word until the blindfolds are off. So we seat them at the table, take their blindfolds off and they just kind of giggle. The table was set, we had a friend who rings the doorbell and he comes in and starts playing love songs on the piano. So he's playing love songs, we're eating and enjoying conversations and then we clear the table and we start to dance in the foyer. We're dancing to live music and whispering sweet nothings in one another's ear and just enjoying our first Valentine's Day together as a couple. Then the piano player leaves, and we go into the living room and sit down. The music doesn't stop because we grab a guitar

and start to serenade our girlfriends. We had written them a song based on Proverbs 31 to our girlfriends, and we sang it to them. It was amazing. Then everyone leaves, and it's just Natalie and me. I knew what it wanted to tell her, and I knew that this was the right moment to say it. I had waited a long time. I had felt this way before I ever told her. The moment was right, so I just lean in and say to her, "Natalie Jeffrey, you just need to know that I love you." And Natalie said to me, "I don't, and I'm not ready for that." So I then just start backpedaling here. I was like, "No, I think you misunderstood me. What I meant was I love it when we talk like this. I love you when you act so silly, like you are right now. And if you thought that I was like, 'I love you,' it's way too soon for that. Duh." So we then had a DTR (Define the Relationship), because I thought we were up here, and she thought we were down here. And we had to clear that gap. And that was a kick in the guts, to say the least. I wasn't sure if we were going to continue the relationship the next day or if that was done. I never said it again to her for four years, mainly out of spite, but a lot out of I thought I learned some things. But it was just a paradigm shift. It was just something that I wasn't expecting. It was good for me, but I wasn't expecting it. It was what I needed to hear, but I just wasn't ready to hear it.

And that's what Jesus is going to do right here. It was such a good day for Peter and the disciples. They were just kind of climbing this roller coaster. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. We're going to go down into Jerusalem, and we're going to take over. We're going to get out of this evil regime, and we're going to be set free and ransomed. Israel will finally regain her place. And You, Jesus, are going to be our leader. You're the one who is going to set us free." From that time, Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, be killed and on the third day be raised. This is a shift in what Jesus is about to teach and in what Jesus is about to do. This marks the end of His Galilean ministry, and Jesus turns and sets His face squarely on the cross. From that time, Jesus began to teach them that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of the chief priests, elders and scribes, be killed and be raised on the third day. This is one of four times that Jesus is going to say, "I am going to die, and I am going to rise." It's a dramatic shift in His ministry. He's no longer perform all the Galilean miracles. He is steadfast in moving towards Golgotha, towards the cross. He's marching into known suffering, known heartache, known hurt. This is where He's going, and He's steadfast and secure. And He says, "This is where I'm going." And Peter, who is not ready to hear it, who is not prepared to hear it again, steps forward to speak for the group and says this, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." He began to rebuke Jesus saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you. This is not what is expected. This is not the way it's supposed to be. We thought it was going to be different. We are not marching into Jerusalem to suffer and to watch You die; we are going into Jerusalem triumphantly." And he rebukes the One who he just declared as Christ, the Son of the living God. He just kicks against the very One to whom he said, "You're God. You are the One who is sovereign, who knows all things and all things fall through Your hands. You are in charge of every minute detail." And Peter rebukes the Lord.

And where I've had to guard my heart and watch my heart in this season is that I don't act like Peter. Do I mourn? Yes, I mourn. Do I want to suffer? No, I don't want to suffer. Is it hard, challenging and tearful? Absolutely. Is it troubling? More than you know. But I don't want to be like Peter, who stands here and confesses, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Let me tell you how to run the world." Jesus turns to Peter and says, "Get behind me, Satan!" Feel that. That's heavy. That's harsh. "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." "Peter, the way that you're thinking is a hindrance to My mission. I'm going to Jerusalem for a purpose, and the way that you are thinking is satanic. Get behind Me. You're a hindrance to all that I want to accomplish, all that is for your eventual good and joy. It is heavy and hard, but it is best. I am sovereign, and this is what it means for Me to be Savior. So get behind Me, and get in line with My mission, because the way that you're thinking is a hindrance."

And this is where the gut-level check for my heart has been. Surely I'm pushing against Him. "But Lord, don't You know? Don't You know all that's before us as a body? Don't You know all that's before us as we push back what's dark in the

world? Don't You know?" And He says, "I know. But don't you know that, because I'm sovereign, all things pass through My hands." So somehow, this is part of His design and is for our eventual joy. "Don't You know that, because I am the Savior who redeemed you, I love you? Don't you know that you are sitting square in the middle of My love and My care? Don't You know? Do not push against Me in this. Get in alignment with what you confess about Me, that I am the Christ, I am the Son of the living God. It is difficult, it is hard, it is challenging, but don't you know that I know? Because you're My son, because you're My daughter, there is no condemnation. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Don't you know that this is not wrath? This is mercy and is for your eventual joy. Don't you know?" So I found myself backing up to this question again. "Josh, who do you say that I am? In this, who do you say that I am?" "I say that You're the Christ, the Son of the living God and that I need You."

Jesus turns from Peter after He rebukes him and begins to teach His disciples. Matthew 16:24, "Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" This is the paradox of faith. Jesus is saying, "Get in alignment with this. If anyone comes after Me, know that this is the cost: just as I suffer, you too will suffer. You are not exempt from it, you are not entitled to any other life here than the life that I lived, which is a straight forward march to the cross. What I promise you and what I give you is future grace and the security now that you are Mine forever. I am the Christ, and I am the Son of the living God. Now get in alignment with what that means. It means that you take up your cross and you follow Me. And you do it day in and day out. It's difficult and challenging, but in this, you find life. This is where life is found, when you lose it. When your life is denied, then you will burst forth and blossom to find the sweet nectar of life. It's following Me, because I am life."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a pastor and theologian in the 1940's, during the reign of Nazi Germany and Hitler, led what is called the German Confessing Church. He was a bright light in the tiny country of Germany during her darkest hour. And during this season, Bonhoeffer wrote two books. One is called Life Together, and it's a book about linking arms in Christian community. They were suffering, they were in the midst of trial and he said, "Do not break now. You hold fast to those who confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. You hold together in this time, and you link arms. Do not do this alone. You stay together, church. You stay linked together." So don't wade through this alone. Link arms with a brother and a sister, and you walk through this trial together. Bonhoeffer's more popular book, published just after he was murdered by the Nazi regime, is a book called The Cost of Discipleship. In it he says that the greatest danger to the church is what he called "cheap grace." It's a grace that comes without cost, it's a grace that comes without sacrifice and it's a grace that does not demand. He says it's a grace without the cross, and that grace is inadequate, insufficient and no real grace at all. He says that the greatest jewel, the greatest treasure of the church is costly grace. It's a grace that you fight for and hold on to. It is grace with suffering, it is grace with the cross and it is grace where when Paul says, "You were bought with a price. You are not your own," you say, "Yes, Lord." It's a grace that costs you, because it cost Him so dearly. It's the kind of grace that this church has been preaching and teaching for years. It's a grace that we try, by His grace, to hold on to. And Bonhoeffer says this in the opening line of the book, "When Christ calls a man He bids him, 'Come and die.'"

To flip it around, when Christ calls a man, He bids him to lay his "yes" down at the feet of Jesus. At the foot of the cross, I lay my "yes" down. So whatever Jesus asks me to do, it is "yes" because all of the promises of God are "yes" in Jesus. When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die. It's not the invitation that's preached so often here in Evangelical America, because we have this entitlement thinking that the American dream is ours and life is supposed to go a certain way where we're entitled to health, wealth and all happiness. It's a great dream; it's just foreign to the Scriptures. It's something that we uphold and put out that's fantastic for campaign slogans; it's just not real. It's just not reality, at least not for His people. Because He says this, "I'm going to Jerusalem, and those that come after Me will follow in My wake."

But don't be dismayed, for I will never leave you and I will never forsake you. All of the promises of God are 'yes' in Me. I am the Christ, the Son of the living God. So your faith and hope is steadfast and anchored in Me. So lay down your 'yes.'" Does the Lord bring hard times?" Yes. The Lord brings prosperity? Yes. Does He bring sickness? Yes. Does He want me to move to the nations to proclaim His goodness and His worth? Yes. I read this article this week about some missionaries who are entering a very dangerous field. When asked about fear, they said, "By God's grace, we don't have fear because we died long ago." They said "yes" to Him. When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die, and we lay it down.

So with Natalie, as I said before I never told her I loved her again for four years. Until one night in the Fall of 2002, I took her on a date. I was nervous and didn't eat a thing and lied to her about why. We went back to the house and sat on the same love seat. I said, "I've been thinking for a long time about Peter. Peter makes this great confession, and then he's sitting at the table at the Last Supper and says, 'Lord, I will die for you.' And Jesus says, 'You'll deny Me three times.' Peter says, 'No way.'" Jesus replies, 'Before the rooster crows.' And sure enough, Peter did, and it crushed his heart. But in all of that, the Lord calls him back and restores him gently. And then Peter goes on to be a man of faith who preaches and proclaims the gospel to the day of his own death, of his own martyrdom. He said, 'I am not worthy do die in the same manner as my Lord' and asked to be crucified upside down. Somewhere along the way, Peter got it." And so I said to Natalie, "Somewhere along the way, I feel like I got it, and I want to tell you something. Natalie Jeffrey, I love you. I absolutely love you." And she started crying, which was redemptive and I needed her to cry in that moment. And she just said, "I love you too. I love you so much." And she thought that was it, but that wasn't it. I said, "No, you don't understand. I love you." I got down on my knee and said, "Here, this ring, I want to give it to you. I want to commit my life and my love and my all to you from this day forward. Whatever life brings, I want to be right next to you, and I want you right next to me. I love you. I want you to be mine, and I want to be yours. Will you marry me?" And she said "yes." And that next June, we stood before the Lord God Almighty, before one another and before a church, and we said, "In sickness or in health, for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse, whatever you have I'm yours. I'm not going anywhere." And she looked me square in the eye and told me the same thing. And we shared vows and promises and rings and we commit. Through thick or thin, we laid the "yes" down at that altar. "Whatever you bring, I'm yours and you're mine until the Lord calls us home." So life for me has been learning what it means to live through the grid of this understanding that I am married and am no longer my own. I am now one with another flesh. There were two, and now there's one. And life is unfolding before us, and we're learning what that means. We're learning what it means for us to be one. Last night, she was there. This morning, she was there. We're together. We're committed, whatever life brings. We've had difficult, difficult times, we've had wonderful, wonderful times, we got to see these two little ones come into our world and we got to see all of the challenge of two little ones coming into our world. But she knows that when she lays her head on her pillow and I tell her, "Natalie, I love you. If you need me, I'll be right here," she's mine and I'm hers.

And so for the Christian, those who confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, life is coming into alignment with the reality that He marched steadfast toward the cross and He expects His people to do the same. He walked into Jerusalem knowing that suffering, hardship and death were His, and He expects His people to do the same. Why? Because He's the Sovereign who reigns and the Savior who redeems. All things are in His hands, under His control. And then He loves us. This is profound. But He says it the same, "If anyone would come after Me, let him take up his cross, deny himself and follow Me. Because the one who denies himself will find that the gates of life swing wide open to him. Am I there yet? I'm not even close. But I find comfort that the apostle Paul, who went to the third heaven, said, "Am I perfect? No, I'm not perfect. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. I share in His sufferings so that I might share in His resurrection." That's my hope. I'm not there yet. I hurt and I grieve just like the rest of you, but my confession and the confession of this church is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. And because of that,

we will press on. We'll press on because He is our prize, He's our joy. In this time and in this season, we trust that He has us and that He loves us.

Let's pray. "Father in heaven, I feel blessed. I feel blessed because flesh and blood has not revealed this precious truth to me, but You have. You have touched my life in such a way. You have revealed the reality and the hope of heaven to me. So I stand up here and confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. I trust in the work of Your Son on the cross, that His death was sufficient, that it satisfied Your right and just wrath towards me, that my sins have been forgiven, that I've been washed clean, that I have the hope and the fullness of all the promises that You have ever made. Because I'm Yours and You are mine. I stand up here without shame because I'm forgiven, I'm a son of the King. And I stand here confused, worried and troubled but anchored in the reality that You're sovereign and all things are under Your control and that You have sent nothing my way that is not for my eventual or our eventual joy. We pray for our brother. We lift up Matt to you. We ask by Your grace and because we know that You can, if it's Your will, would You bring fullness of healing to our brother, our pastor and our friend. We pray comfort and peace over his family. I pray for his kids specifically, that You would open their little hearts. Because what their daddy has been telling them for years, their daddy is unable to do. But You alone can do it, Lord. And so we beg that You would open their hearts to see and confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. We will trust You through all, for the glory of it all. Amen."

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