

The Pain and the Irony of the Cross

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[0:00] Open up your Bibles, if you would, to the Gospel of Mark, chapter 15. We have been marching steadily through this Gospel for over a year now.

And we are drawing very near to the end of it. Next week, we will finish this Gospel as we spend Easter Sunday looking at Mark's account of the resurrection of Jesus.

Which means that today, we have the blessing and the benefit of standing in the shadow of the cross. As Mark recounts the death of Jesus.

And so I want you here in your Bibles, in Mark chapter 15. I'm going to pick up in the middle, towards the end of verse 20. And then we're going to read all the way down through verse 39.

And I want to ask you guys to stand with me together as we read this Word. Mark tells us, And they led him out to crucify him.

[0:58] And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. And they brought him to the place called Golgotha, which means place of the school.

And they offered him wine mixed with white myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them to decide what each should take.

And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, The King of the Jews. And when they had crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left, and those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, Aha!

You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross. So also the chief priests, with the scribes, mocked him to one another, saying, He saved others, cannot save himself.

Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down from the cross, that we may see and believe. Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

[2:13] And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, limos, abachthani, which means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And some of the bystanders hearing it said, Behold, he is calling Elijah. And someone ran and filled the sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink, saying, Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.

And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion who stood facing him saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, Truly, this man was Son of God.

Thank you for this word. Teach it to us when we pray. In Jesus' name, I pray. The cross of Christ. The Apostle Paul tells us that the cross of Christ is foolishness to the Gentiles, and a stone of stumbling, an offensive stone of stumbling to the Jews of his day.

[3:38] The Apostle Paul tells us that the world sees the cross and sees it as utter foolishness. Now, that may not seem to connect with your experience of the average person's response to the cross.

Because we have crosses all around us. They're on the side of the road when someone dies in a car wreck. We see them in cemeteries all the time. We see them on the sides of buildings.

People wear them around their necks as jewelry. And so we see the world not responding to the cross with the kind of revulsion that Paul describes. And we think, maybe, maybe attitudes have

changed toward the cross.

Maybe over these 2,000 some odd years, people have become more accepting of the idea of a Savior dying on a cross. But I don't think that's the case at all.

I think that what we see in the world around us is people who do not know what the cross means. People who do not know what the cross is and what it signifies and what it tells us about Jesus.

[4:48] Because what we're going to find Mark revealing to us about the cross of Christ is repulsive to most people today. In fact, Mark highlights, he highlights two things in this passage.

The first I'm going to call the pain of Jesus upon the cross. Now, I know that we're all accustomed when we think of the pain of the cross. Of envisioning the Passion of the Christ movie that Mel Gibson made a few years ago.

And we, through that movie, many of us have become familiar with the physical anguish of Jesus. And that's a reality. It's one that Mark does not completely ignore in his account of Christ dying on the cross.

But it's also one that he does not highlight. That he does not call special attention to. Now, there are probably a couple of different reasons for that. One of the reasons is that Mark wrote this letter from Rome.

You remember that Mark, by this time in his life, by the time he wrote this gospel, Mark had become essentially a co-worker of Peter, a disciple of Peter. So that Mark's gospel is, for all practical purposes, it is Peter's account of the things that Peter was witness to, and the things that Peter knew happened in the life and ministry of Jesus.

[6:03] And so Mark, writing in Rome under the tutelage of Peter, is writing this gospel for a people who are all too familiar with crucifixions.

They have seen not hundreds, but thousands of people crucified on roadsides, in different rebellions and revolts. They are very, very familiar with what a crucifixion is.

In today's world, when we put someone to death, none of us sees it. It's not broadcast on television anymore. We read about it the next day, or we hear about it on the news the next day, that so-and-so was killed, either through injections or through the electric chair, and we don't see any images, and we don't hear any descriptions of their death.

There are deaths which are, by the way, fairly humane. If you're going to die at someone else's hand, the best way to do it is in America at the end of the state, because it's pretty painless. The cross was not so painless.

And the people were very, very familiar with the pain of the cross. So one reason Mark doesn't highlight is because he doesn't have to. They understand, when they read, as we saw last week, that Jesus was flogged by Roman soldiers.

[7:18] They know what flogging is. We don't. Flogging is when they take a whip that has several strands on it on the end, and there are pieces of broken glass and metal attached to the ends of the pieces, and they whip you, usually on your back, enough times until most of the flesh is gone from your back, and the bones are exposed in many places.

That's flogging. They're familiar with that. They know exactly what that is. They don't need to watch a movie. They don't need to read a book. They've seen people flog. They know it. They know what it is to be crucified. They've seen nails go through hands and feet.

They've seen people hang on crosses for hours and sometimes days until they could no longer lift themselves up to fill their lungs with air, and they suffocated to death. That was the cross in their minds and their world.

They understood when Mark just says, very simply, and they let him out to crucify him, at the end of verse 20. They know what that means. Mark doesn't have to spell it out for them.

But I think there's more to it than that. There's another reason that Mark does not take the time to highlight the physical pain of Jesus. I don't think that Mark, and especially the Holy Spirit, who inspired him to write this book, they were not unaware that later generations would read this account who were not as familiar with floggings and crucifixions.

[8:32] The point is that the physical anguish of Jesus is not highlighted because it's not the primary suffering that he endured on the cross. We can see his anguish.

We can see his physical pain. We see it, for instance, in verse 21, where we're told that they, the Roman soldiers, compelled a passerby named Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross for him. Cyrene was an area in northern Africa where there was a large population of Jews. And so this man, Simon, was probably in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. It was common for people to travel many miles for the Passover.

And he would have been staying outside the city, in the country, at someone's house, as he waited to come into the city every day to celebrate the Passover. And as he's entering into the city, they, of course, crucified Jesus just outside the gates, the writer of Hebrews tells us.

So as he's coming into the city, they grab this man, Simon, and they compelled him to carry Jesus' cross. And the only reason for them to do that is because Jesus is simply unable to carry the cross. [9:34] It would have been the beam, the cross beam, not the whole thing. You see the guy going down the side of the road who's got the cross on his shoulder, little wheels on it, dragging him down the road. Not that sort of thing. Just a big, massive beam that they would hold on their shoulders, carry up the street until they arrived at the place where they were to be crucified.

And everyone carried their own beam. That's what happened when you were crucified. You just, you carried it. You carried it out to the place. It's part of the shame. It's like being forced to dig your own grave in Western days.

It's just part of the shame that you have to endure. And yet apparently Jesus is so severely beaten that he's unable to carry the cross beam. Unable to make it there. So there is some reference, veiled as it is, to the physical anguish of Jesus and that he's unable to carry his cross.

And this man named Simon, a Jew from Africa, has to carry it for him. Moreover, I think the people in Rome probably were familiar with even that aspect of the story.

Because notice what he says. He refers to this Simon as the father of Alexander and Rufus. Why would you do that, Mark? None of the other gospel writers tell us that Simon had two kids named Alexander and Rufus.

[10:43] Well, because the people in Rome knew who they were. They knew Alexander. And they knew Rufus. In fact, if you read the end of the letter that Paul wrote to the Romans as he's sending his greetings to people in Rome, he sends a greeting to a man named Rufus in Rome.

That was a fairly common name. We don't know for certain that it's the same Rufus, but it probably is, given that Mark makes a reference to him here. So these people knew Simon's sons.

They were familiar with the story. They know what's happening. Mark does not have to go into detail even on this aspect of the story. We're told that they brought him to a place called Golgotha, which means place of a skull.

There's been a lot of speculation about why it was called that and where it was located and all sorts of things. You get the typical sort of painting, and it's always of a hill, the sun setting behind it, right? On a hill, and Jesus' cross is lifted up higher than the other two crosses, all right? Probably not at all what happened. They usually crucified them on the side of the road where everybody could see them passing by. And no doubt, Jesus would have been not lifted up above these common robbers and thieves, but just splayed alongside them.

[11:52] He's no better. He's no better than the Romans. So he sits on the side of the road in a place called The Place of the Skull. We don't know why. Maybe because so many people died there that it was littered with skulls.

Maybe some have speculated that the shape of the area looked like a skull. We have no idea. But the point is, this is a place of death and suffering. And then it's emphasized a little bit more in verse 23 that you would probably read past and be a little bit puzzled by.

Verse 23 says that they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. Now, he offered two drinks as he's on the cross. Here he's offered wine mixed with myrrh, and then later on in verse 36 we're told that someone ran and filled the sponge with sour wine and put it on a reed and gave him the drink.

So he's offered two drinks. The first drink he refuses. The second drink he accepts. And that sounds a bit confusing until you realize what these drinks were. The first drink, wine mixed with myrrh, would have been like a narcotic.

Something to dull the pain. Something to take the edge off. And it was very common. In fact, in the book of Proverbs, there's a command for those who are being executed to be given wine with myrrh.

[13:03] To sort of ease their suffering and ease their pain. And so it's a compassionate thing to do for a person who's being executed. And so most likely, it's being done by the women who are there, who are followers of Jesus, offering him something to dull the pain of the cross, and yet he refuses it.

He will endure, fully conscious, all the pain the Father has determined he will endure. Every good. He accepts the drink later because it's a different drink.

The drink that they offer him later is not offered by people who are trying to help him. The drink that's offered him later is by the people who are curious to know whether or not he's calling Elijah. And they know, they can see, he's about to die.

So let's give him this drink that will nourish him and help him maybe to hang on a little bit longer so we can see what he's up to. So we can see what he's going to say next.

And so Jesus takes that drink because it doesn't offer him any sort of relief from the pain that he's enduring. So Jesus, we know, is going to fully endure the incredible physical pain that all that is meant by a flogging crucifixion.

[14:16] He's going to endure it fully until the moment that he dies. And yet, Mark says very little about that.

He does not go into detail. Because the physical anguish of Jesus, we saw this a few weeks ago when we were in the Garden of Gethsemane with Christ and we said that the physical anguish of Jesus was not the primary pain that he endured on the cross.

The primary pain that Jesus endured is found beginning down in verse 33. Take a look at it with me. Here's the suffering. And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, Eloi, Eloi, sabachthani. And Mark tells us, translates that for us because his readers in Rome didn't speak here in the day.

That means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus was put on the cross, we're told, at around nine o'clock in the morning. That's the third hour.

[15:22] They start counting and when the sun comes up, sometime around six. So around nine o'clock would have been the third hour. He's been on the cross now for about three hours. Okay?

We were at noon. He's on the cross. Sun at its highest here and the darkness covers the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour, at three o'clock, we're told that he cries out to God. Why have you forsaken me? The darkness that comes upon the land for these three hours, if you know your Old Testament, when darkness comes in the middle of the day, that is a sign of the coming, the judging of God.

It happened to the Egyptians. It happens at periods throughout biblical history. The prophets of the Old Testament, when they speak of judgment, one of the ways in which they describe it is of darkness coming upon the land.

And so the darkness that comes for three hours is the darkness of God's judgment. Not, though, his judgment upon the crucifiers of Jesus. Not his judgment upon Pilate or the priests or the Roman soldiers.

[16:31] Not that judgment at all. The judgment that the Father is sending is the judgment for the sins of me, for the sins of you, for the sins of all of his people throughout all of history.

The judgment that ought to be due to us now falls upon Jesus, which is why Jesus, quoting Psalm 22, cries out to his Father, why have you forsaken me?

I have heard preachers say that well what was happening here is that the Father could no longer bear to see the physical anguish of his son. And so no longer able to bear it, turns his back on Jesus and Jesus feels abandoned.

And it's not at all what's happening here. The presence of God is spoken of in two ways in the Bible. The most common way is in a positive sense. He is present among his people.

He is present in the tabernacle. He is present with us through Christ. He is present with us through the dwelling work of the Spirit. But the presence of God is also spoken of in terms of judgment.

[17:38] He comes around. God has not left. He's everywhere. He's omnipresent. Jesus feels abandoned because he is cut off from the love of his Father.

And the wrath of his Father is now being poured out on him in full. Immeasurable wrath is poured out on Jesus in this moment.

Wrath comes in the form of darkness and wrath settles upon Jesus. Infinite wrath. Infinite anger. Rest upon him in this moment.

One have you forsaken me. He wants us to go back to Psalm 22. Passage that I read earlier in the service.

He wants us to see that the Son is enduring what was prophesied of him a thousand years before. Did you hear in that Psalm when I was reading it earlier?

[18:41] David wrote that Psalm and he described his hands and his feet being pierced. Centuries before crucifixion had been invented. It didn't exist when he wrote those words.

It has no immediate meaning for David. David can't conceive of a crucifixion. And yet, prophesying of the death of the Messiah, David describes a crucifixion.

We are meant to see Psalm 22 being fulfilled here. We are meant to see Jesus feeling a sense of abandonment, being as a worm and not a man.

He is nothing now. The Father's full wrath rests upon him. And that is his suffering. You know, Jesus died much earlier than anyone expected him to die.

In fact, Pilate is surprised when people come to Pilate and tell him that Jesus has already been. because typically, people did hang on crosses for several days. Because the point of the cross was to be a slow, agonizing death as you suffocated.

[19:47] Because you became too weak to lift yourself up and breathe, you just suffocated slowly but surely by a cross. That was the point so that everybody could walk by and see you slowly die from whatever you had done to offend the Romans.

And no one would want to do what you had done. Pilate is shocked that Jesus dies so early on in his crucifixion. And I suppose it's possible that the physical beatings that Christ took before he was crucified could have played a part in this.

After all, he can't carry his own cross being. It is quite possible that his physical anguish, his physical pain, the blood loss and everything else that he's already endured has so weakened him to the point that he only lasts for a few hours.

But that doesn't seem to be the case. He doesn't suffocate like a normal person suffocates. He cries out as he dies. Crucifixion is slow, slow suffocation.

Taking smaller and smaller breaths, lifting yourself up less and less until finally you get a tiny little breath that's just not enough. Jesus screams out as he dies.

[21:01] I don't think that the floggings and the beatings and the nails ultimately caused Jesus to die.

I think that it's impossible to endure the wrath of God and live. It cannot be done. You understand what he endured?

The pain of the cross is something that you and I we cannot imagine.

Not because we don't know what nails through hands look like or feet because we cannot imagine the wrath of God pours and waves on his own until he finally cries out in pain and anguish breathes his last dies.

That's the pain of the cross. The mark not only highlights this intense spiritual anguish of Jesus he also highlights the actions of the others and there's a great irony to the things that the other people who surround Jesus as he's dying on the cross there's a great irony to the things that they do and say that help us to better understand what Jesus is accomplishing in taking the father's wrath upon himself.

[22:27] Listen to the kinds of things that they say. In verse 26 we're told about the sign that hangs above him the king of the Jews the full inscription read this is Jesus of Nazareth king of the Jews as if

anything good could come from Nazareth.

Jesus is mocked even as the charge is laid in front of him. But then listen to what the people say. 27 they crucified with him two robbers one in his right hand and one on his left and those who passed by derided him wagging their heads and saying aha you who destroyed the temple and rebuilt it in three days save yourself and come down from the cross.

There's two things that are very ironic about this statement. They can't get the charge right yet and remember when Jesus was on trial before the Sanhedrin they brought in false witnesses probably people that they paid off to bring some testimony against Jesus so that they could find something that would be worthy of death and one of the things that the people testified is they said well he said that he was going to tear down the temple and three days later he was going to build it up and yet Mark tells us even about that they couldn't quite get the story straight and so that story is apparently a popular story that has been spread and now Jesus hangs on the cross and they taunt him with it you said you were going to be able to tear down a temple this magnificent structure and build it in three days you can't do anything Jesus and yet in John's gospel chapter 2 when Jesus actually said something similar to that Jesus said to them destroy this temple and John said he was talking about his body you destroy he never said he was going to destroy the temple but he said if you when you destroy this temple

I'll raise it up in three days they don't get it they're chiding Jesus for his inability to tear down a physical temple down the road while they're fulfilling his own prophecy you will destroy the temple of my body and I will raise it up in three days they say it and they taunt him and they do not understand that's exactly what's happening the temple of God is on fire the temple of God is falling to pieces on a cross John says he came and tabernacled among us when he became a man he is the living embodiment of the temple system he is the ultimate sacrifice and they tear the temple down and chide him for his inability to do something he never claimed he would do it's ridiculous they don't get it and then they say save yourself and come down from the cross as if he has any desire in this moment to save himself he's laying down his life for these kinds of people he's laying his life down for the kinds of people who would kill him and murder him in fact the book of Acts tells us that many of the priests came to faith in Christ later on those those who made the charges against him and sent him to the cross you see a Roman soldier here coming to faith in Christ these people mocked Jesus calling upon him to rescue and deliver himself when all that he is doing is to the end that people like him and some of them specifically would be redeemed and saved themselves great irony that he won't save himself because if he saves himself he cannot save them he cannot save you and he cannot save me then you go on there's more mocking chief priest in verse 31 chief priest with the straddle mocked him one another saying he saved others he cannot save himself same accusation let the Christ the king of Israel come down now from the cross that we may see and believe but if he comes down from the cross your faith will be worthless if he doesn't pay the penalty for your sins faith in him will not save you faith in

[26:37] Jesus only saves if it connects us to the suffering of Jesus where he bore the penalty for our sins come down and we'll believe in you if he comes down it doesn't matter if you believe in him if he comes down you're lost and I'm lost and we have no hope and yet they do not see the irony of what they say even we're told the people who were crucified with him they also revive him over and over and over Jesus endures the shameful mocking of everyone around them and what they cannot see is that in the midst of it all he's saving him some of them at least saving us in the midst of it all we can see we can see the outcome of his work on the cross towards the end of our passage after these people offer him the sour wine because they when they hear him cry out he said in Hebrew it would have sounded more like

Eli would have been how you say Elijah in Hebrew which is probably a good chance he said it in Hebrew which sounds like Eli which is Elijah it's a shortened form of Elijah and the prophets and Jewish tradition taught the coming of Elijah at the end of times to rescue and deliver his people of course the gospels tell us that John the Baptist was an Elijah like figure who fulfilled those prophecies but they think that Jesus is calling Elijah to come and rescue him because it sounds to them like he's calling the name of Elijah of course he's not and we're told as we move through the passage that something happens something incredible verse 37 Jesus uttered a loud cry they try to

help him to endure give him the drink to help him last longer it doesn't matter because the wrath of God rests on him he drinks it he cries out and breathes his last and at that moment we're told in verse 38 the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom that massive curtain that separated the holy of holies in the center of the temple from the rest of the temple only the high priest passed through that curtain once a year to offer sacrifices for the people only once and the curtain remained the curtain was there in the tabernacle the curtain was there in the temple the curtain remained century after century after century because every year the priest needed to pass through the curtain to offer sacrifice every year and all those sacrifices as they passed through the church all those sacrifices were but a shadow of what would happen on the cross there's no need of a high priest to enter into the holy of the holy there's no more need of sacrifices in the temple because

Jesus has laid down his life and offered up to God what the writer of Hebrews tells us was a once for all sacrifice for his people and he has saved them to the uttermost the writer of Hebrews tells us there are no more sacrifices there is no more curtain to separate us from the presence of God now that Christ has died in our place he has torn the curtain into the sacrificial system and brought the spirit to live within each one of us not over the ark in the holy holy holy so say to Christ the wrath of God has now been fully satisfied on the cross of Christ if you begin to understand the cross in those terms it's not a piece of jewelry for you it's not comfortable to see crosses decorating buildings and roadsides it's not comfortable because it represents something that most people today don't even believe in the infinite wrath of God that's what the cross represents that's what the cross tells us happened on that day it is it is the only way that sinners like you and me can be saved it is the only hope that we have that if we will but trust in him his blood that he shed on that day will cover our sins and the wrath of the father meant for us and our sins will have fallen on

Jesus instead of us if you trust in him there's one other I think powerful motivator that you can gather from understanding exactly what happened at the cross because I know that most of you who are here today would say I have trusted him I believe this gospel I believe in the cross work of Christ that's what I hope in most of you would probably say that and so I want to offer you some application of seeing and understanding the true meaning of the cross you don't have to turn there but I want to read to you what the apostle Peter says in 1st Peter chapter 1 as he thinks upon the cross he says in verse 17 he says if you call on him as father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds he recognizes the wrath of God he's a judging God you call him father conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile that's your time on earth knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers not with perishable things such as silver and gold but with the precious blood of Christ like a lamb without blemish or spot you want motivation for resisting temptation think if I do this it will be a sin for which

Christ had to shed his blood when temptation comes your way and when it assaults you think to yourself I have been ransomed by the very blood of the son of God how dare I trample upon his blood and walk in sin so that when when you are tempted to lie when you are tempted to enter into a relationship that you know is not a godly relationship when you are tempted to treat others around you with scorn and contempt think and remind yourself I have been ransomed not with gold not with silver I have been ransomed from these very things by the blood of Jesus the invaluable blood of Christ has been shed so that

[34:05] I may no longer be enslaved to these kinds of things Peter says that he was born on before the foundation of the world but he was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who threw him on believers in God who raised him from the dead and gave him glory so that your faith and hope are in God all your faith and hope in God through Christ is that true is is your deep sense of hope that all will be well in the end is it rooted and grounded in what Christ has done for you on the cross is that true and if it is bind it close into your heart so that this afternoon tomorrow when temptation flies your way you will have a ready weapon you will have the knowledge of the cost of your forgiveness let's pray through