

**Mark:
Is This the King?**

Mark 15:16-32

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April 2, 2006

Please be seated. Now we come this evening and next week to consider together the account in Mark's Gospel of the crucifixion, and as we do so...it is always a solemn thing to ponder and reflect on the manner of Jesus' death, but as we do so tonight we want to specifically think of it not just as a death, but a death for us and on our behalf. And before we read the Scriptures together, let's once again come before God in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we bow in Your presence. We want especially to ask this evening that You would come by Your Spirit and enable us once again, as we view the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, that You would remind us afresh of our utter unworthiness of so great a gift, that You so loved the world that You gave Your only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Now come, Holy Spirit, and write this word upon our hearts and give us the spirit of illumination, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now we're reading from the fifteenth chapter of Mark's Gospel, and beginning at verse 16. This is God's word:

The soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium), and they called together the whole Roman cohort. They dressed Him up in purple, and after twisting a crown of thorns, they put it on Him; and they began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting on Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him. After they had mocked Him, they took the purple robe off Him and put His own garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him.

They pressed into service a passerby coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His cross.

Then they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull. They tried to give Him wine mixed with myrrh, but He did not take it. And they crucified Him, and divided up His garments among themselves, casting lots for them, to decide what each man should take. It

was the third hour when they crucified Him. The inscription of the charge against Him read, "The King of the Jews." They crucified two robbers with Him, one on his right and one on His left. And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And He was numbered with transgressors." Those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, "Ha! You who were going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests also along with the scribes were mocking Him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!" Those who were crucified with him were also insulting Him.

Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Many of you, I'm sure, are familiar with a very famous painting by a Pre-Raphaelite painter, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Holman Hunt, and the painting is called "The Shadow of the Cross." It depicts Jesus, perhaps a late teenager, in early manhood perhaps, stripped to the waist inside what was His father Joseph's carpenter shop. And it's late in the evening and the sun is now beaming through the door, and Jesus has His arms stretched out. And the workbench and His outstretched arms cast a shadow on the wall behind Him, the focus of this painting; and the shadow is in the form of a cross and Jesus crucified to it. It's actually a very significant piece of art in that theologically it depicts something which is very true: that the work of Jesus was not only accomplished here on the cross, but was in fact a work which began from the moment of His conception. And all through the earthly ministry of our Lord there was an inexorable goal to it: namely, that He would be crucified. He had set His face to go to Jerusalem. And now as we come to these portions of Scripture tonight, and God willing, next Lord's Day evening, we want to be singing as we read this very familiar account,

"Sweet the moments rich in blessing
Which before the Cross I spend;
Life and health and peace possessing
From the sinner's dying Friend."

Or,

"Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the Cross of Christ, My God..."

And we sing that not because of what we necessarily could have seen with our eyes and heard with our ears, because that which they saw and heard was utterly repulsive. We would be utterly repulsed by the sight of crucifixion. But it's because of what we have come to understand the crucifixion to mean, because God has added to the crucifixion an interpretative word: that the Cross speaks of

substitution and satisfaction of a Savior who has lain down His life as a ransom for our sins, that you and I might know the hope of glory and the adoption of sons; that we are able, you and I, to sing

“Sweet the moments rich in blessing
Which before the Cross I spend....”

Now, in many ways, as Luther was fond of saying, *crux probat omnia* — the cross interprets everything; or, the cross is the test of everything. Everything about our Christian faith is interpreted for us by the significance of what Jesus is doing here upon the Cross, and I want us this evening in the first half of our consideration of the crucifixion of Jesus to see three things that Mark especially seems to be focusing upon: *A Suffering Theme*, in the first place, in the way in which Mark describes the crucifixion; and, *A Curse Theme*, in the way in which Mark tells us that He was crucified between two thieves, one on the left and one on the right; and, *An Enthronement Theme*, in the significance that Mark seems to draw our attention to in the plaque that was above Jesus' head which bore the words “The King of the Jews.”

I. A suffering theme.

In the first place, then, A suffering theme. A suffering theme - and you see it there in the second half of verse 20: “And they led Him out to crucify Him.” After the mockery and insults on behalf of the Roman soldiers in the Praetorium, after they had dressed Him in purple and beaten His head with a reed and spat upon Him, now He is led along the streets of Jerusalem, along the Via Dolorosa, the way of sorrows, toward that place where they will crucify Him. He carried the *patibulum*, the cross beam on which His hands will be nailed. It was a wooden beam that may have weighed anything from forty to fifty pounds, according to some; and according to others possibly even as much as eighty to a hundred pounds. And Mark reminds us again of the physically weakened condition of our Lord's body at this point, having been scourged with the 39 lashes by Pilate's men, His back bleeding and lacerated and torn to shreds, carrying now this wooden beam.

At a certain point He collapses along the road, and a man called Simon of Cyrene is forced (and the Greek word is a very strong word)...he is forced against his will (or so it seems) to bear this wooden beam on Jesus' behalf. Mark seems to indicate that his sons are known to the readers of the Gospel: Alexander and Rufus.

Who is this man? We aren't absolutely sure. There is a Rufus that is mentioned at the end of Romans, and there is also in Acts 13:1 the mention of a Simon of Niger, who may or may not be the same figure.

And now as we follow Jesus and Simon of Cyrene as they make their way along the Via Dolorosa to the place of execution, they arrive at Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, identified by some as a hill that from a distance actually looks a bit like a skull, so-called Gordon's Calvary...or, perhaps indeed the traditional location where the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is today.

They offer Jesus wine mixed with myrrh, a spice from the Arabian desert and having some kind of narcotic, dulling effect upon the senses. It was a gesture of sympathy, it was a gesture of compassion — the only one, indeed, that even remotely appears in these descriptions of the crucifixion, but Jesus refuses. And He refuses for a particular reason: because as the substitute and sin bearer, He must needs bear in His own body the full and unmitigated wrath of His Father without the compensation of this narcotic.

And they crucify Him.

And Mark's account is so economical. He mentions only the barest of details. None of the salacious details that you would imagine a modern day visual description of crucifixion might entail on CNN or Fox — or even for that matter in *The Passion*. Because Mark, whilst emphasizing and stressing the physicality of what is happening to be sure, wants us also to see a deeper and in some ways more profound understanding of what the crucifixion is actually about. Mark doesn't actually say so, but it is inferred from the details that His clothes are now taken away from Him, and in all probability Jesus is crucified naked.

One of the heresies, you see, of the later church was to deny the reality of Jesus' humanness. It's understandable when the church was eager to defend the deity of Jesus and the Godhead of Jesus, that He was very God of very God...but there were others who suggested Jesus' body wasn't real, that He was some kind of phantasm or ghost-like creature. And there were others, Apollonarius, who did not credit Jesus with a human mind or spirit. And there were others, Uticus, who suggested that Jesus was some kind of composite figure — half-human, half-God — and that He could switch from one to the other at a moment's notice and perhaps dull the effects of the physical crucifixion by appealing to His divine nature. And all of those, of course, are errors. And what the Gospel writer in the economy of its description wants us to understand is that Jesus is suffering here in the full and complete sense of physical pain and suffering — cramps, muscle spasms, the bleeding which would now render Him in a semi-conscious condition.

“We may not know, we cannot tell
What pains He had to bear.”

And He suffers, too, in what we might call a social way. Mark reminds us in a little more detail now of the way in which the crowds mock Him, reminding Him of those words about destroying the temple and in three days building it again. And

then the priests calling upon Him to come down — He who could save others, now save Yourself and come down — taunting him. And even the two thieves on the cross joined in this act of brutality. And He dies. And you see it, my friends. He dies bereft of any sort of any comfort.

We've witnessed in these last few days the importance of social comfort, of brothers and sisters coming alongside each other in moments of great stress. But Jesus is alone. He is absolutely alone. His disciples now have fled for fear; the establishment has turned against Him. In every quarter and section of society He is bereft of support. There's no one to help Him.

Perhaps the words of the twenty-second Psalm, which Jesus will quote when He says, "My God, My God! Why have You forsaken Me?" (which we'll take up next week) — perhaps the words of the twenty-second Psalm are on Jesus' mind: "All who see Me mock Me...they hurl insults, shaking their heads"; "He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord deliver Him, since He delights in Him."

Don't you think, my friends, my brothers and sisters, don't you think that Jesus is now being tempted to ask the question, "My Father, where are You now? Where are You when I need You the most? Where are You when I find Myself in the depths of hell?" Don't you think Jesus is now being tempted to call a legion of angels to come down in chariots of fire and take Him away? And clouds of darkness are descending, and they're descending on the very messianic consciousness of Jesus, so that in a little while He won't even say "My Father," as though the consciousness of His own native sonship has been obliterated now, and all that He is conscious of is being a condemned sinner under the wrath of God. And all He can say now is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" There's a Suffering Theme here.

II. A curse theme.

But there's a Curse Theme here, too. He was crucified [verse 27] between two thieves, one on the left and one on the right. Now, other Gospel writers, Luke especially, will draw attention to the fact that one of these thieves will actually repent in the eleventh hour. "Have mercy on me when You come into Your kingdom," and those beautiful words "Today you will be with Me in paradise." But Mark doesn't draw our attention to that, because Mark wants us to see...he wants us to see the answer to the question "Where is Jesus now?" And He's not only hoisted and nailed to a Roman gibbet, but He's between two sinners. He's between two thieves.

You notice in verse 28 that some manuscripts [and it's in the New American] contain these words of Scripture as fulfillment here, and the Scripture was fulfilled where it says "...and He was numbered with the transgressors." Just as that fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, that Servant Song, had prophesied, He is

numbered with transgressors — He's one of them. He's being reckoned as a sinner — the sinless, spotless Lamb of God is numbered with transgressors. Mark wants us, I think, to see that...to see that what is taking place here is the fulfillment of prophecy, that what is taking place here is that which the Old Testament Scriptures had predicted all along, because those words in Isaiah 53, "He was numbered with the transgressors," goes on to say "and He bore the sin of many." And do you remember what Jesus had said earlier in Mark's Gospel, in the tenth chapter? That He had come to give His life as a ransom for many. The same passage. And it's as though it's all coming to full circle now, as that which Isaiah 53 had been depicting in terms of that glimpse of that Suffering Servant of the Lord, and here He is.

You see, Mark wants us to be able to answer the question "Why is Jesus dying on a cross?" And the answer is "He is dying on a cross as the answer to the question 'How can we be saved? How can our sins be forgiven? How can sinners be reconciled to God?' And the answer to that question which had been given in covenant from before the foundation of the world was that the Son of God Himself would become incarnate, and that He would live this perfect in life in obedience to every facet of the Law, and that this righteous life would be reckoned with sinners, and the sin of God's people reckoned to His account, and He would die to bear the covenant anathema of God in our room and in our stead; so that as Paul will go on as he explains this in the Galatian epistle, "Christ became a curse for us." And that's what's taking place here, that you might know the peace of God that passes all understanding, Jesus becomes a curse for us, hanging between two thieves, reckoned as the off-scour of the world, worthy of no pity, shamed in His nakedness with the holy anger of God His Father descending now upon Him for our sins, for our transgressions, that we might be forgiven, that a way might be opened for us to come into fellowship with our Father in heaven.

"What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul?
What wondrous love is this?"

But Mark, you see, has focused on something else: the fact that His clothes have been taken away from Him. Do you remember? Back in the Garden of Eden before sin had entered into the world, they had no clothes. They were naked and not ashamed. And now, as it were, in order for Jesus to undo the effects of Adam's fall that has beset us all, He must go all the way back to where Adam was — naked before God — and render to God a righteousness which Adam did not render. He's undoing the curse - do you see? - by bearing that curse in His own body upon the tree.

III. An enthronement theme.

There's a Suffering Theme here, and there's a Curse Theme here, but there's an

Enthronement Theme here, too. It's the sign.

Now, Mark doesn't tell us, but it's another writer that tells us that it hangs above His head, and it bears the words "King of the Jews." In verse 2 and in verse 9, and in verse 12 and in verse 26, and in verse 32, like a ringing bell Mark has repeated these words: "King of the Jews." He's drawn attention to that crown of thorns, in mockery pushed down upon His head. And what Mark wants us to see in truth and in reality, despite the mocking tones of the authorities that wrote those words on that whitewashed plaque, burned into it "King of the Jews," what Mark wants us to see, do you see, is that He truly is the King of the Jews. He truly is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Yes! This poor benighted cursed figure hanging upon the cross, His life ebbing away, unable now so much as to move a muscle, as the last gasp for breath as He tries to hoist Himself to draw air into His lungs fails Him and He dies. And Mark is saying He's King, you see. You don't see it there, of course. You see it in chapter 16, when "Up from the grave He arose, Jesus, my Savior."

We want to ask, don't we, what are we meant to do when we see this crucifixion of our Lord? And you know, perhaps a better question tonight would be, "How should we respond to it?" Bow down, my friends. Bow down. Get as low down as you can possibly get, and weep that this is what it cost...this is what it cost to redeem you. This is what it cost to bear away your sin. This is what it cost the Son of God to bring you into fellowship so that you can say "My Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." Bow down, my brothers and sisters! And weep, and worship...and worship....

Man of sorrows, what a name
For the Son of God who came
Ruined sinners to reclaim;
Hallelujah! What a Savior!
What a Savior!

Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, every time we glimpse the Cross we shudder a little. Were You there when they crucified our Lord? Sometimes it causes me to tremble.... We want it to be far less than that to bear away my sin...that my sin drove Jesus to the Cross...Help us to hate it, to hate our sins with perfect hatred. And help us tonight to bow down and to weep a little, and to worship, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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