

The Crucifixion of Jesus: Mark 15:21-32
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This morning we're going to meditate on the crucifixion of Jesus. You may shy away from any detailed study of the crucifixion. You may not be eager to hear a thorough description of the things that happened to Jesus. It may seem so gruesome and horrid that you would rather not think about it. And that's certainly understandable. These things certainly are horrid, and it makes us cringe just to hear about what happened. It's hard to imagine what it would have been like to actually witness the crucifixion in person—to stand there and see with our own eyes and hear with our own ears the things that were done to Jesus.

As uncomfortable as this may be for us, it is necessary for us to meditate on the crucifixion of Jesus, because this is at the very center of who we are and what we believe. This horrible event is the very foundation of the best news in the whole world. Yes, this is horrific. It is gory and appalling. But it is the bedrock of the Good News. So we gaze upon the cross and all of its gore, but we do so in order to see the glory of the Gospel.

It's my hope that a deeper knowledge of the cross will give us a deeper knowledge of our own sin, a deeper knowledge of God's grace and love toward us, and a deeper knowledge of what has been accomplished for us through Christ. As we meditate on Jesus' suffering, we should see that His unspeakable suffering is what we deserve for our sin. That's how awful our sin is. And we should see how great the love of God is for sinners, that He would send His own Beloved Son to suffer like this in our place. And we should rejoice that through Jesus' suffering and death and resurrection, sinners are reconciled to God. For those who repent and believe, our sin is credited to Christ, and His righteousness is credited to us. This is the amazing news of the Gospel! So let's consider these things in detail together this morning, not because we love gore, but because we love the Gospel.

In the Old Testament there's a dramatic event that foreshadows the death of Jesus. It's a preview of Jesus' death. It's the account in Genesis 22 of Abraham and Isaac. That chapter begins with God testing Abraham by telling him, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." And Abraham obeyed. He took his son, Isaac, and it says that "Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son." Isaac carried the very wood that he was supposed to die upon, just like Jesus began to carry His wooden cross until they recruited Simon to carry it for Him. But

when Abraham bound his son and laid him on the altar and reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son, the angel of the Lord called out and stopped him. And a ram was provided to be sacrificed instead of his son.

That event, in God's sovereignty, gives us a glimpse into the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Isaac was the only son, the beloved son, of Abraham. Jesus Christ is the only Son, the beloved Son, the eternal Son, of God the Father. The love between them is incomprehensible to us. It is infinite. It is eternal. And that's why it's so moving to realize that when God the Father and God the Son came to this point in their story, no one cried out at the last moment to call it off. The Father drove that knife into His Son's heart. God did not spare His own Son, His only Son, His beloved Son. But He gave him up for US! He crushed His beloved Son on that cross. He poured out His wrath against sin upon His very own Son, so that He can spare us from that wrath. Jesus was not spared so that we can be spared.

As we think about the crucifixion of Jesus, think about the intense love of the Father for the Son and the agony that each of them experienced while Jesus suffered these things.

The Shame of the Cross

At the end of last week's sermon I spoke about Simon who carried Jesus' cross and how this provides us with a picture of discipleship. This is a tangible portrayal of what Jesus said to His disciples when He told them in Mark 8:34, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

So we pick it up now in verse 22 as they now arrive at the place where they will crucify Jesus. In Aramaic it's called Golgotha. Mark translates it for his readers, that it means "place of a skull." In Latin it's *calvus*, meaning scalp, and it's from that word that we get Calvary. This would have been a prominent place outside the walls of the city. It was the practice to execute people, not in the midst of a city, but rather outside the gates. But the Romans also wanted it to be a place where many would pass by and see the horrible punishment that threatened anyone who would rebel against Rome.

Jesus is offered this mixture of wine and myrrh, something that could have alleviated some of the physical misery he was experiencing. But He refuses it. He continues to face His own death with his eyes wide open. Even to the very end, he did not seek an escape or even anything to diminish the pain.

In verse 24 Mark uses only three words to record something that no amount of words could adequately describe. In the English, it takes four words to translate it. "And they crucified

him.” In the Greek it’s just three simple words. Amazingly, Mark does not elaborate. He gives details about other things that happened in connection with this. But about the crucifixion, itself, he does not expand on. There are no modifying phrases, no adjectives, no further sentences. “And they crucified him.”

For the original readers of this Gospel, nothing more needed to be said. That one word, crucify, was sufficient. Intense images would immediately come to mind. For us, we need at least a little bit of background and description.

Everything about this mode of execution was torturous and shameful. It was meant to be a long, agonizing death, and it was meant to bring as much shame and ridicule upon the person as possible. The Romans crucified many, many individuals. And they used this as a way, not only to punish those whom they deemed to be criminals, but they also used it as a powerful deterrent to the masses. It was a scare tactic—a vivid and gruesome scare tactic. In 71 B.C. when Spartacus led the slaves in a revolt, Rome defeated them and then crucified 6,000 of the rebels along the Appian Way that led into the city of Rome. For miles people would have witnessed in an unforgettable way the power and the ferocity of the Roman authorities.

Crucifixion involved incredible shame and agony. It was so shameful because the condemned individual was put on display before the public so that all could watch them suffer and die. Men were typically crucified naked, adding to the shame. We’re not sure if that was the case for Jesus. It may be that the Romans allowed a loincloth because of Jewish sensibilities. Regardless, crucifixion was a shameful death. To be bruised and bloody from the flogging, and then to be attached to a wooden cross and lifted up for the masses to scoff at, it’s about the most humiliating and horrific ordeal imaginable.

The intense shame would only be exceeded by the intense physical agony of crucifixion. Death by crucifixion was basically death by exhaustion. It was a prolonged death. Once attached to the cross, the victim would have to raise himself up for each breath, pulling with his arms and pushing with his legs. For those who were simply tied to a cross, this could go on for days. For those who had been flogged severely, and for those nailed to a cross, death could come much more quickly.

In 1968 archaeologists discovered three burial caves just northeast of Jerusalem, and in them they found bones which give evidence of crucifixion in the first century.¹ They found the complete remains of an adult male. In his right heel bone there remained a 4 ½ inch nail. They also found that a small piece of wood had been placed between the heel and the head of the nail,

¹ William Lane cites this study, page 565.

serving as a kind of washer so that the foot was securely fastened to the vertical beam of the cross. Both shins were broken, which gives evidence of what is recorded in John 19:31. They would often break the legs in order to speed up the process. If the victim's legs were broken, it would make it all the more difficult for him to raise himself up for a breath.

These details help to paint the gruesome picture for us of Jesus on the cross. His hands or wrists were pierced with nails and fastened to the horizontal beam. His feet were nailed to the vertical beam. He had already lost much blood from the scourging. He had a crown of thorns pressed into his head. He was nearly naked, if not completely naked. His garments were being divvied up between the soldiers. He was raised up between two robbers, for all to see, with a sign above His head which read, "The King of the Jews," meant as a mockery. And everyone around was mocking Him, from the passersby to the chief priests and scribes, to the thieves who were on the crosses next to Him. This was the shame and agony of the cross.

Mark does not give us many details about the crucifixion itself, but he does give us some details about the mocking things that were done and said. The soldiers took Jesus' personal belongings, which was only the clothes on his back, and they cast lots to see who could keep what. Of course, they had no idea that they were fulfilling ancient prophecy, written in Psalm 22:18, "they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots." It's from that same Psalm that Jesus will quote when He says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Every detail of this is a fulfillment of prophecy and part of God's eternal plan to save sinners.

There are also those passing by who shout out their scornful remarks. Here, again, is a misunderstanding of what Jesus had said about the temple. In John 2:18 Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." And then the Gospel writer gives us this explanation. "But he was speaking about the temple of his body." In the trial before the Jewish council, they tried to use this as an accusation against Him, claiming, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" (Mark 14:58) But first of all, Jesus did not say, "*I will* destroy this temple . . ." And secondly, He was not even speaking about the physical temple at all. He was speaking about Himself. Others would destroy Him, kill Him, and He would then rise on the third day. Everyone had obviously misunderstood Him, as they had misunderstood so many things about Him. They use this against Him when He's on trial, and now they use it against Him again as a way of shaming Him while He hangs on the cross.

The chief priests and scribes are loving this moment. They are reveling in their victory over Jesus, as they see it. They are eager to rub salt in the wound as much as they can. They mock Him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself." And even the thieves on either side of Jesus are reviling Him as well. The scorn is coming from every direction. It is heaped upon Him. He is utterly alone.

Next week we'll see that there were a few individuals who did look upon Jesus favorably. There was the centurion who said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" And there were the women who had followed Jesus, who remained there looking on from a distance. Mark records those details after the account of Jesus' death. Leading up to the death, Mark focuses on the flood of hatred and scorn that comes like a tidal wave upon Jesus.

And to think that His disciples have abandoned Him, Peter has even blatantly denied Him, and His own beloved Father has forsaken Him to pour out His wrath upon Him. I've described some of the physical agony of the cross, but that pales in comparison to what was going on in Jesus' heart. This was infinite anguish. We cannot begin to comprehend it.

The Glory of the Cross

Now that we've seen the shame of the cross, let's consider the glory of the cross. Even as Jesus is shamed and mocked and reviled, there is something glorious going on here. The soldiers do not see it, the passersby do not comprehend it, the chief priests and scribes are so hard-hearted they refuse to believe it, and the thieves reject Him too. But there is something glorious happening before their eyes. There is something monumental going on here. This is the climactic event in God's plan to save sinners. This is it! This is the most beautiful and powerful display of love that has ever been shown, or ever will be shown. Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, who deserves glory and honor and praise forever, allowed Himself to be the object of such ridicule and humiliation and torture. He did this out of obedience to the Father. He did this out of love for us. He did this so that sinners might praise God's glorious grace. He did this for the joy that was set before Him.

What an amazing moment in history, as the perfect, sinless, Son of God hung on a cross, and depraved, sinful humanity lashed out at Him with all the vengeance they could muster. This is a striking picture of our depravity and spiritual blindness, and there's a stark contrast between that and Jesus' loving sacrifice. Talk about undeserving recipients of a glorious gift! How more undeserving could humanity be? We rejected Him, hated Him, mocked Him, and killed Him in the most shameful way

imaginable. And what did Jesus do in return? What did Jesus do in subjecting Himself to this death? He redeemed sinners. Sinners who had rejected Him, hated Him, mocked Him, and killed Him, He died to redeem individuals who can be described in just that way. We showed Him hatred. He showed us love. We captured Him and killed Him. He gives us freedom and life. We took the sinless Son of God and called Him a criminal. He takes hell-deserving sinners and calls us righteous. This is the glory of the cross!

We see the glory of the cross in this passage in some interesting ways. There's irony in some of the ways that true things are affirmed about Jesus, even though it's done in jest. It's done with the purpose of mocking, but it's true nonetheless. The soldiers dressed Jesus up like a king in order to make fun of Him, not knowing that He is the Supreme King over all. They hailed Him, King of the Jews. Now the sign appears on the cross, King of the Jews. And even in the chief priests statement in verse 31 there is truth. "He saved others; he cannot save himself." Now, Jesus certainly had the power to save Himself. But He could not save others and also save Himself. That's the glorious Gospel truth that comes through in the mocking words of the Jewish leaders. Interestingly, they admit that "he saved others." They're thinking of His healing ministry and all the amazing miracles He performed. But they speak better than they know. Jesus saves, not just in physical temporal ways, but spiritually, eternally. He saves from sin. He saves from eternal torment in hell. He saves us from the wrath of God. And He does this by not saving Himself. He accomplishes this by giving Himself up to be condemned and killed.

The chief priests and scribes go on to say in verse 32, "Let the Christ, the King of Israel (again saying true things of Jesus), come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Now, the truth is that even if Jesus did come down from the cross at that moment, they would not have believed. Most likely they would have said what they said back in chapter 3 when they were trying to come up with an explanation for His miraculous power. They said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons" (Mark 3:22). This shows their spiritual blindness. They are slaves to unbelief. They are imprisoned by skepticism and hatred toward Jesus, as we all are before we're born again.

But here's the glory of the cross. Jesus could have come down from the cross, but that would not have resulted in them seeing and believing. Instead, Jesus stayed on the cross in order that many might see and believe. 1 Peter 2:24 says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and

live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." As that Gospel message goes forth, the Holy Spirit regenerates hearts. Where there was blindness, there is sight. Where there was rebellion against God, there is delight in God. Where there was mocking of Christ, there is praise of Christ. Jesus stayed on the cross and died for our sins, so that we can be born again and thus see and believe.

The chief priests and scribes did not see or believe, but someone else did. Someone was born again in that hour in a remarkable way. Mark does not record it for us, but Luke does. "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" (Luke 23:39-43)

This is the amazing story of a man who was born again just moments before his death. One moment he was reviling Jesus, just as everyone else was, as Mark records. But at some point as they hung there on those crosses, this man was given spiritual eyes to see Jesus for who He is, as Luke records. This man stopped his reviling, and he called out to Jesus in faith, "remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus is gracious. He is forgiving. He tells the man, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Where are you at this morning? Maybe you walked in here today with a mocking and skeptical attitude toward Jesus and Christianity. I pray that you will walk out of here with new eyes, with a new heart. I hope the miracle of regeneration will occur in you, so that you can see Jesus for who He is. I hope you will be able to see that the shame of the cross is not foolishness, but it is the power of God. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:18, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." I hope it will become plain in your mind and heart this morning that the shame of the cross is the glory of the cross.

Jesus endured such shame . . . for us! He was drowned under this tidal wave of ridicule and humiliation and excruciating pain, so that we can escape that shame and pain. Because of what He did, we are saved from hell and receive the gift of heaven where we will praise Him forever and ever.

I want to make two very brief points of application. Last week I talked about shame and how Jesus experienced the shame

that we deserve for our sin. He took it so that we don't have to. Here are two other things to consider in light of the cross.

First, think about suffering. We will all suffer in this life, in different ways, to different degrees, at different times. There is much suffering in the world, and it will touch each and every one of us. But the cross of Jesus radically changes how we view suffering. Because if it were not for the cross, then all of our suffering would be punishment and condemnation. The suffering of this life would be but a foretaste of the suffering we would endure for all eternity in hell. Suffering would simply be what we deserve.

But in light of the cross, suffering becomes something entirely different. On the cross, Jesus took the punishment we deserve. All of that was satisfied through His atoning death. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1) So what is suffering? It's not punishment. It's not condemnation. It's not a foretaste of what we'll experience for all eternity. No, instead it's a refinement process to prepare us for heaven. It's a purifying process that will crush idols and make us delight more in God. When you suffer, look to the cross. Look to Christ's suffering, and consider what His suffering means for your suffering.

Another thing for you to consider is the way that the cross of Christ is completely at odds with legalism. We are wired to achieve. We are wired to make everything about ourselves. We want to appear powerful and in control and capable. We don't want to appear weak or helpless or needy. But think about the implications of that when we approach the cross. If we come to God saying, I can do this, I'm able, I'm worthy, then we are saying that Jesus' death was not enough. We are saying that Jesus' death was unnecessary. When we begin to think that we are earning favor with God based on our own merits, we then find ourselves standing among the mockers, shouting out to Jesus, "save yourself, and come down from the cross; what you're doing is meaningless and ridiculous." So let us come to the cross and see the shame and glory of the cross, and may we never want to diminish what Jesus did for us there. He paid it all. Don't try to add to what He did. Simply live in awe of what He did. Rejoice in what He did for us! Follow Him, not as an employee trying to earn something from an employer. Follow Him, rather, as the recipient of an unspeakably great gift. We follow Him because He loves us and redeemed us, and it's our joy to be with Him.

It's like the story that is told of Abraham Lincoln—a story that is probably more legendary than factual, but a wonderful story nonetheless. Anthony Carter recorded it in a recent article. It is said that Lincoln "went down to the slave block and noticed a

young black girl up for auction. Moved with compassion, he bid and won her. Upon purchasing her, Lincoln told the disbelieving young girl that she was free. In her surprise she said, ‘What does that mean?’

‘It means you are free,’ he replied.

‘Does that mean, she said, ‘I can say whatever I want to say?’

‘Yes, my dear, you can say whatever you want to say.’

‘Does that mean I can be whatever I want to be?’

‘Yes, you can be whatever you want to be.’

‘Does that mean I can go wherever I want to go?’

‘Yes, you can go wherever you want to go.’

And the girl, with tears streaming down her face, said, ‘Then I will go with you.’”²

That’s how we follow Christ. Not merely out of duty, or because we’re trying to earn something from him, but out of delight. Where else would we go? Who else would we follow? He is the One who redeemed us.

I’ll close with this concise testimony from C. J. Mahaney that I think is so powerful. He writes this in his little book, *The Cross-Centered Life*.

“I was smoking pot the first time I heard the gospel. People often ask me why I’m so confident in God’s grace. I explain that my understanding of Scripture and my own conversion experience leave me with no other explanation. God came looking for me. I’m a Christian because God showed mercy, not because I was worthy or wanting to be saved. No, I wasn’t searching for God. I was stoned.

“It was 1972. I was sitting in my bedroom smoking a joint when my friend Bob began to share the simple story of Jesus dying for my sins. I’d grown up in the Catholic church and had never heard the gospel.

“But that night as I listened, God revealed Himself and regenerated my heart. I believed. The cross was for *me*. Jesus was *my* savior. The worst of sinners, in the midst of his sin, was born again.”³

And that’s what we can say this morning as well, all who are repenting of sin and trusting in Jesus. The cross is for *me*. Jesus is *my* savior. The worst of sinners, in the midst of my sin, has been born again.

So let’s be people who never tire of talking about the cross. Let’s be a church where the cross of Christ never gets old or routine. There is always more to see, more to meditate on, more to

² Anthony Carter, “The Price of Our Redemption,” TableTalk, November 2011, page 43.

³ Cross-Centered Life, page 72.

appreciate, more to marvel at. Let's marvel at it now as we partake of the Lord's Supper.