

Shame You Don't Deserve

The Cross (Part 13)

Mark 15:21 (Mt.27:32; Lk.23:26) 12/17/2022

*What do you do when the opinions of others mean too much to you? You can't stand it when certain people disapprove of you, maybe you're a people pleaser or you shy away from conflict.
How do you escape the fear of man?*

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Mark 15:21 A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

Introduction

Simon

Well, they finally wrap up their gruesome vaudeville entertainment session and get on with the crucifixion.

20 And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. 21 A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander¹ and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

Can you imagine this? You're just minding your own business one day, on your way into town for Passover, travelling along, and suddenly you're involved in a crucifixion? Just witnessing a crucifixion could give someone PTSD. It was a brutal, bloody, violent ordeal so horrific that the word "cross" was a taboo swear word in Roman society. Can you imagine just walking home one day, and

¹ NIGTC: A burial-cave used in the first century prior to the destruction of the Temple and belonging to a family of Cyrenian Jews was discovered by Israeli archeologists on the southwestern slope of the Kidron valley in November 1941. The intriguing possibility that this tomb was owned by Simon and his family is raised by an ossuary inscribed twice in Greek, "Alexander, son of Simon," [See N. Avigad, "A Depository of Inscribed Ossuaries in the Kidron Valley," Israel Exploration Journal 12 (1962), pp. 1-12.]

you don't just witness one, but suddenly you're *involved* in one? Some soldier point at you and orders you to carry the guy's cross.

Simon wasn't a follower of Jesus.² He probably figured Jesus was a criminal who deserved what he was getting. And now he's connected with this criminal.

I don't imagine the soldiers were very gentle with Simon. They are in savage mode already. In order to carry out a crucifixion, you'd have to pretty much set aside normal human sensitivities and just let all the worst animal instincts to take over. And when a whole group of men do that, they'll do anything to anyone. So I'm guessing this was a pretty brutal ordeal for Simon.

Gentiles

My big question when I was studying this is why it's mentioned. There's no explanation or connection to anything. Mark just tells us it happened and moves on. Why is it important that we know someone carried the cross?

And not just someone—specifically a guy by the name of Simon. That sticks out because normally Mark doesn't mention people's names. When Peter attacked Malchus at the arrest, Mark doesn't tell us Malchus' name or Peter's name. He just says someone standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest. He doesn't even mention that it was a disciple.

Mark is like that, most of the time. But here he not only tells us Simon's name, but we get a whole dossier on him—his name, where he's from, his kids' names, why he was passing by—way more detail than Mark gives for even much more important characters. Why so much information?

Mark wouldn't include it if it weren't important, so let's go through each part. He starts by telling us where he was from—Cyrene,³ which was in Africa. So this guy was an African, which makes him a foreigner.

It was a herculean effort for the NT writers to convince the Jews of their time about God's favor on the Gentiles.⁴ So the gospel writers are usually quick to point out when Gentiles play a favorable role. Here Mark says, "It was a foreigner who carried Jesus' cross."

Historical Verification

Next, why does Mark tell us his boys' names? It sounds to me like the people Mark was writing to didn't know Simon but did know his sons. "Hey, you know Alexander and Rufus? Well, it was their dad who carried Jesus' cross."

We know Mark had connections with Rome,⁵ and we know there was a leader in the church of Rome named Rufus—Paul mentions him in Romans 16:13.

Romans 16:13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.

So it sounds like this is for the purpose of historical verification. Kind of like when Paul talks about the resurrection of Jesus and says he appeared to 500 people at once, and Paul says, "Many of whom are still alive." The point is, you can talk to them and verify this. Mark might be doing some-

² If he were, he wouldn't have been casually coming in from the country passing by while Jesus was being crucified.

³ There were a lot of Jews who lived in Cyrene, in Africa, and some of them became key players in the early church. **Acts 11:20 men from Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the gospel of the Lord Jesus.**

Acts 13:1 In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon Lucius of Cyrene, and Saul.

⁴ It's sometimes assumed that Simon was a Jew because of his name, but Simon was a common name among Jews and Gentiles. It's possible he was a Jew who grew up in Africa, as many Jews were scattered around the world at that time. But by emphasizing he was from another country, it seems Mark wants us to think of him as a foreigner.

⁵ Peter was connected with Rome, and Peter was Mark's source for his gospel.

thing like that. “All this stuff I’m telling you about what happen at the crucifixion—if you doubt me, just talk to Rufus and Alexander. Their dad was *there*.” The Bible is full of historical markers like that. You notice Bible stories don’t begin with “Once upon a time” (or “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away ”).⁶ It’s more like, “During the reign of this king you know, in this place you know, when this other famous event was taking place, here’s what happened ”

Sometimes critics say the events of the cross must be legends because none of the disciples were there. How could the Bible writers possibly know all these things that happened when they all deserted Jesus at his arrest? None of them are there at the cross. Answer—Simon was there. Talk about an eye-witness. No one had more of a front row seat for the crucifixion than Simon, and his sons were still around.

Divine Help

Another thing we can observe in this event is how God provided all Jesus needed to follow through with drinking his cup. If Jesus doesn’t make it to the cross, that’s a problem. Sometimes men died during the flogging, other times on the way to the crucifixion they died from their injuries. If that happens to Jesus we’ve got a big problem, because crucifixion was part of the cup Jesus had to drink. He has to be put on a cross, but he doesn’t have the strength to get there.

So God provides help. He did it through the soldiers, who no doubt had evil motives for commandeering Simon’s services. But God always uses evil deeds of evil men to accomplish his purposes. The soldiers think they are commandeering Simon for their purposes, but really God is commandeering the soldiers for his purposes.

God provided Jesus help he needed to accomplish his will. He made his Son drink the cup of suffering, but he didn’t push him over the brink beyond the limits of what Jesus, in his humanity, could handle. What God calls us to do, he enables us to do.

And this incident reminds us that sometimes the worst things that happen to you end up being the best things that could happen. What happened to Simon was unjust, unfair, unsettling, painful, infuriating. And yet the result was his son Rufus becomes a man chosen in the Lord, his wife ends up being like a mother to the Apostle Paul, helping in his ministry, the church is established in Africa. Horrible injustices are inflicted on you, and they can end up being the best thing that ever happen to you.

Parable of Discipleship

So those are some possible reasons why this event was included in Mark. But if we’re looking for connections with the rest of the gospel, the one that stands out the most is from ch.8 v.34 where Jesus said if anyone would follow me, he must take up his cross and follow me. Following Jesus with a cross on your back is the definition of what it means to be a Christian. That’s the core meaning of what it means to be a follower of Christ, and so what happens here with Simon is included in the account because it’s such a clear parable of Christianity. What happened with Simon provides a vivid physical picture of the spiritual reality of what it means to be a Christian.

That’s not to suggest Simon was a spiritual follower of Jesus. But it does serve as a parable because what he did physically is a model of what we do spiritually.

Bearing Christ’s Shame

And this is important for understanding this chapter because it gives us more insight into the theme that dominates the crucifixion account, which is shame. Why did Simon have to bear the

⁶ Of course, there are parables that begin with something like, “There once was a man who ...” but the historical events present themselves as historical events, not legends or myths.

shame of carrying a cross in the middle of a criminal's execution? How did that happen? It happened, according to v.21, simply because he was passing by.

21 A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

This guy got thrown in with the harsh treatment of Jesus simply because he got too close. That is a model of Christianity. If you're connected to Jesus, you will receive the hostility this world directs at Jesus. In Simon's case, he was just close to Jesus in physical proximity—he happened to be walking by. In our case, we're connected with Jesus through our allegiance to him. So it's a different kind of connection, but it still makes the point. You get close to Jesus, you end up carrying Jesus' cross. If you're not prepared to be crucified, you're not prepared to be a Christian.

We saw last time that the main thing Jesus was doing on the cross was not suffering the physical punishment we deserve. He was doing that, but more importantly he was bearing the shame we deserve. Mark goes on and on and on about the insults and mockery and humiliation Jesus suffered because that's the central focus of the purpose of the cross—for Jesus, who deserved no shame to bear the shame we do deserve. He bore our shame in our place so that once we allow shame to do its job and drive us to repentance, that repentance results in forgiveness that leaves no regret. The shame is gone.

But that's not the end of the story about shame. Jesus bore our undeserved shame in our place so we no longer have to. We no longer have to bear it in this life, nor do we have to go to the place of everlasting shame and contempt after we die (which is how the book of Daniel describes hell). We are free from our deserved shame.

But we're not free from all shame. Part 1 is Jesus bore our deserved shame, but part 2 is we bear his undeserved shame. Those who crucified Jesus heaped shame on him that he didn't deserve. And when we identify with Jesus, the world will heap shame on us too. Do we deserve that? Is it a shameful thing to follow Christ? No. It's an honorable thing. And yet the world will heap shame on us for it because of their hatred for Christ.

Simon getting too close to Jesus and ending up with the shame of carrying a cross is a parable of how we participate in Christ's suffering. As Christians, we do play a role in Christ's suffering. Paul goes so far as to say this:

Colossians 1:24 Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.

Paul's suffering for the church filled up what was lacking with regard to Jesus' suffering? We'd probably call that blasphemy if it weren't in the Bible. What is Paul saying—Jesus didn't suffer enough? He didn't pay a high enough price and Paul had to pitch in?

No. Jesus paid the full price and when he died, it was finished. Paying the price for redemption was finished. What wasn't finished was the personal delivery of that gift to individuals around the world. For that to happen, people like Paul (and all Christians) have to suffer in order to bring the good news of what Jesus did to the ends of the earth.

When the world mocks us and persecutes us because of our association with Christ, that's part of what it means to follow Christ. It's a summary of the gospel: Jesus bore our deserved shame and we bear his undeserved shame.

Shame is Real Suffering

And how we bear that aspect of Christ's suffering is a major theme in the New Testament. So let me just give you a quick overview of what the New Testament says about that.

To begin with, the suffering of humiliation is real suffering. Mockery is something that, if it's not happening to you, just doesn't seem all that painful. We teach our kids the sticks and stones

thing (words can never hurt you), and we tell other people, “Hey, if people are badmouthing you, just ignore it. Let it roll off your back. You can’t let people get under your skin.” Mockery just doesn’t seem like it should be all that hard to endure—when it happens to other people. But when it happens to you—if everyone in this room started ridiculing you, making fun of you, saying the most hurtful things we could think of, not in jest, but with a real malicious attitude intentionally trying to hurt you, it would be excruciating. Sticks and stone can break your bones but words can never hurt you? Most people, if they think back to the most painful words ever spoken to them would much rather have suffered a broken bone than the pain of those words. A bone would have healed in a matter of weeks. The sting of painful words can last a lifetime.

Sometimes preachers will downplay the significance of verbal persecution. They say, “Here in America, we don’t have the first clue about what persecution is all about. People might make fun of us or insult us, but we’re not being thrown in prison and tortured and killed for our faith like they are in places like Iran.” Christians who are tortured and killed for their faith deserve our greatest honor. And yes, that is far more severe than the persecution you and I face. But it’s going too far to say what we face isn’t even persecution.

In fact, I would suggest that the vast majority of persecution Christians have suffered through the centuries has been verbal. Insults, slander, mocking, humiliation—that’s the most common form of persecution. And the Bible recognizes that as real persecution. It’s not just some small thing we shouldn’t be concerned about. It’s the main form persecution takes. It’s the primary core of what Jesus suffered on the cross, and it’s the most common way we suffer with Jesus. And if we downplay the significance of the insults we receive, we downplay the significance of what Jesus did on the cross because so much of it had to do with insults.

When Jesus teaches us about dealing with persecution, what does he say? Does he mainly talk about having your fingernails pulled out and being beaten and having your bones broken?

Matthew 5:11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

You hear that and say, “Uh, that’s how the persecuted the prophets? With insults? I thought the prophets were sawed in half and beaten and killed.” Some of them were, on rare occasions. But most of what they endured is what we endure—insults. And so that’s what Jesus focuses on when he describes persecution.

How to Handle Undeserved Shame

Having undeserved shame heaped upon you is real suffering. So how does the Bible teach us to deal with that kind of suffering? We learned last time about how to handle deserved shame. You let it do its job, drive you to true repentance, then trust that all your shame was borne by Jesus on the cross and you no longer have anything to do with it. That’s how you deal with deserved shame, but what about undeserved shame? How do you handle the pain of having people humiliate you?

Despise Underserved Shame

Jesus teaches us how, and this is extremely helpful because it applies not just to shame we receive for being connected to Christ, but all undeserved shame. Anytime someone insults you or belittles you in some way, or, for that matter, any time you even feel belittled—whether they meant to or not. If you’re someone worries a lot about what people think of you, you can’t stand the thought of people gossiping about you or looking down on you, maybe you’re a people pleaser or you always run away from conflict because you have to have everyone think well of you—any of those kinds of problems, this principle will help you.

The way to handle all those forms of shame—any kind of undeserved shame—is to follow Jesus’ example. All of his shame was undeserved—how did he handle it without going out of his mind?

Hebrews 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising its shame.

How did Jesus handle undeserved shame? He despised it.

That’s a little misleading because in modern English the word “despise” has changed meaning. Most people use that word now as a synonym for “hate.” So they see this verse and think it’s saying Jesus really, really disliked the shame. That’s not what the word means. Whenever you see the word “despise” in the Bible, you can pencil in, “think little of.” That’s what the word means. If you despise something, that means that thing doesn’t matter much to you. It’s really, really small in your eyes.

If I despise the Colorado Rapids soccer team, that doesn’t mean I hate them. It means I don’t care about them. It doesn’t matter to me if they win or lose. If they have a bad record or good record or get a new coach or stop playing altogether, it makes no difference to me. They aren’t important enough in my eyes to affect my emotions one way or another.

That’s despising, and that’s how Jesus dealt with undeserved shame. The humiliation that was heaped onto Jesus didn’t break him like it did most victims of crucifixion because of how little it mattered to him.

When I was in 2nd grade, I came to school once with new shoes and the kids in the class made fun of me because of the shoes. I was mortified. Today, I could walk into any 2nd grade class in the world and have every single student laugh themselves silly over my shoes, and it wouldn’t bother me in the slightest. At most I might be slightly amused by it, but it would have no negative effect on my emotions whatsoever.

Why? Why did it have such a strong effect before and not now? Because when I was 7, the opinion of my peers meant a lot to me. Now, the fashion opinions of a bunch of second graders means nothing to me. And the assessment of a bunch of pagan soldiers of Jesus meant nothing to him. What *did* mean something to Jesus—what meant everything to Jesus, was God the Father’s assessment of him.

To put it another way, the reason Jesus could handle all this ridicule was that he was living in the big world, not the little world. Remember big life and little life? Little life is everything you will lose the moment you die. Big life is everything that’s eternal. The little world is everything we see around us; the big world is the kingdom of God. So how do we deal with the undeserved shame in our lives? Despise it. Realize how little weight it carries and turn your attention to things that carry real weight, like the approval or disapproval of God.

Commanded

Sometimes unbelievers think Christianity is all about guilt and making people feel shame. But actually, if you look up all the places in the New Testament where the word shame appears, you find most often it’s an emotion we’re commanded *not* to feel.

2 Timothy 1:8 Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner.

1 Peter 4:16 If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed.

Mark 8:38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.

When the characters in this little world try to heap shame on us, we shouldn't even feel that shame, because if you feel it, that means you're assigning weight to it, which means you're living in the little world instead of the big world. Instead of despising it as the little, insignificant thing it is, you're assigning importance to it as if it really mattered. You've lost sight of the big world. God says, "I approve of you! I'm thoroughly pleased with you!" And we say, "So what? How can I be happy with just your approval when this little speck of dust down here in the little world doesn't approve of me?" You only feel that way when you lose sight of the big world and forget all about God's delight in you.

Shame for Christ Is an Honor

The truth is, any time you endure shame for the sake of Christ, whether it be flat out persecution for being a Christian, or just some embarrassment you suffer because of something related to following Christ's way, not only is that not real shame—it's an honor.

Acts 5:41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.

You only get to do that if God considers you worthy, which is an unspeakably high honor. The apostles were nothing special. They didn't have superhuman abilities that you don't have. This was their response simply because they were living in the big world and not the little world. Set your mind on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. And set your heart on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is not hidden with Christ in God.

Harmony

<p>Matthew 27:32 As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross.</p>	<p>Mark 15:21 A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.</p>	<p>Luke 23:26 As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.</p>
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Summary

Why does Mark include the account of Simon carrying the cross? It may be for historical verification (Simon's sons were known in the church) or to show God's help enabling Jesus to drink the cup. But most of all it stands as a physical parable of cross bearing (being a Christian). Christ bore our deserved shame and we now bear his undeserved shame. And how do we handle underserved shame? By despising it (thinking little of it) like Jesus did. Live in the big world, not the little world.