

Christianity Explored

Jesus—His Death

Mark 15:1-41

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February 7, 2010

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Scripture

Today is the fourth week of a ten-week series of messages based on a book that is titled *Christianity Explored* by Rico Tice and Barry Cooper.

The purpose of this series is to explore Christianity, primarily through the writing of Mark in his book we call *The Gospel of Mark*.

I have asserted that the heart of Christianity is a *person*—Jesus of Nazareth. To that end we are particularly interested in addressing three questions:

1. Who is Jesus?
2. Why did Jesus come?
3. What does it mean to follow Jesus?

Previously, we looked at the first question: *Who is Jesus?* Mark asserts that Jesus is “the Son of God” (Mark 1:1), that is, Jesus is God in human form. Moreover, Mark gives five evidences that Jesus is God in human form because he shows us that Jesus has power and authority to teach, heal, calm storms, raise the dead, and (most importantly and significantly) forgive sin.

We have also looked at the second question: *Why did Jesus come?* Mark teaches us that Jesus came to rescue rebels (Mark 2:17). Further, he teaches that we are all rebels (because of our sin), and that we are all in danger of facing God’s judgment (unless we accept God’s way of escape).

What is God’s way of escape? We read about it in our text for today, which is Mark 15:1-41. Let us read Mark 15:1-41:

¹ And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole Council.

¹ The material for this message is from *Christianity Explored* by Rico Tice and Barry Cooper (New Malden, Surrey: The Good Book Company, 2002), 30-44.

And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate.² And Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” And he answered him, “You have said so.”³ And the chief priests accused him of many things.⁴ And Pilate again asked him, “Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you.”⁵ But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

⁶ Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked.⁷ And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas.⁸ And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them.⁹ And he answered them, saying, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”¹⁰ For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead.¹² And Pilate again said to them, “Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?”¹³ And they cried out again, “Crucify him.”¹⁴ And Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him.”¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

¹⁶ And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion.¹⁷ And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him.¹⁸ And they began to salute him, “Hail, King of the Jews!”¹⁹ And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him.²⁰ And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.

²¹ 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.²² And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull).²³ And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.²⁴ And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take.²⁵ And it was the third hour when they crucified him.²⁶ And the inscrip-

tion of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.”²⁷ And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.²⁹ 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,³⁰ save yourself, and come down from the cross!”³¹ So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself.³² Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

³³ And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.³⁴ And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”³⁵ And some of the bystanders hearing it said, “Behold, he is calling Elijah.”³⁶ And someone ran and filled a 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.”³⁷ And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.³⁹ And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome.⁴¹ When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem. (Mark 15:1–41)

Introduction

One of the biographies on my bookshelves is that of General Douglas MacArthur, the well-known general from World War II, which is titled *American Caesar* by William Manchester. Even though it is a big book with almost 800 pages, only 3 pages (which is less than 1%) are devoted to the subject of his death. Interestingly, that is about the same amount of space that is given to the

deaths of most great leaders.

So, it is striking to read in the Gospels (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the Bible) that about *one third* of each Gospel is given to the subject of Jesus' death. Clearly, Jesus was an astonishing individual. But why spend so much time dwelling on his death?

And further, why is it that the mode of his death—the cross—has become the universally-recognized symbol of Christianity?

Christians might have chosen something different to symbolize Christianity. For example, they could have chosen:

- A manger—to symbolize his birth and incarnation, or
- A scroll—to symbolize his teaching, or
- A lamp—to symbolize his brilliant life lived in a dark world, or
- An empty tomb—to symbolize his resurrection.

But, instead, Christians chose a cross, which of course symbolizes his death. But why?

Why a cross to symbolize Christianity? No other religion celebrates the death of its founder. Not only that, but the cross was a particularly horrendous form of execution by the Romans reserved only for criminals.

Imagine if a company started selling necklaces with a pendant that was shaped as a little electric chair. We would think that it was incredibly distasteful. Why would anyone want to wear a symbol of death that is reserved for the worst in our society?

Well, it was just like that in Jesus' day. The cross was the way in which the worst in society were put to death.

But right after Jesus died Christians were not ashamed of the cross on which he died. In fact, they seemed *proud* of it. The Apostle Paul, another writer in the Bible, said this, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14a).

Why boast in the cross of Christianity? Look at Mark 8:31,

“And he [i.e., Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Notice the word “must.” Jesus is saying not only that he will die, but that his death is *necessary* in some way.

Similarly, notice Jesus’ words in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus died to rescue rebels by paying the price to free them.

Suddenly, the thought of the cross as the symbol of Christianity seems less strange. Because although the danger we are in is very real, the cross has something to do with our escape from that danger. Indeed, the cross is how Jesus rescues people.

Lesson

So, today, we learn about the significance of the cross as well as various reactions to the cross.

I. Significance of the Cross

So, first, let us look at the significance of the cross.

A. *God Was Angry (15:33)*

The first thing we learn about the significance of the cross is that God was angry.

Mark 15:33 says, “**And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.**”

Mark is counting hours according to the Jewish system, so the sixth hour would have been noon. At the moment when the midday sun should have been at its brightest in the sky, a darkness fell over the whole land and remained until three in the afternoon.

That is very unusual. What happened? Some people say that it was an eclipse. But it could not have been an eclipse, for two

reasons. First, Jesus was crucified at Passover, and since Passover always falls on a new moon, a solar eclipse is out of the question because solar eclipses do not take place during full moons. And second, solar eclipses never last more than 6 minutes, and the darkness that fell when Jesus was crucified lasted 180 minutes.

So, something else was taking place. Something unusual, even supernatural, was taking place when Jesus was crucified.

In the Bible, light sometimes symbolizes God's presence and blessing, while darkness is a sign of God's anger and judgment. For example, for three days the Egyptians experienced a "plague" of darkness for not letting the Israelites leave Egypt (Exodus 10:21-22). When Israel did escape, darkness foiled Pharaoh's host in their pursuit (Exodus 14:20).²

So when Jesus dies and darkness comes over the land, we know right away that God is angry.

Now, we won't understand this if we see anger as something that is unpredictable, wild, and irrational, the product of a quick temper. God's anger is not like that. It is his settled, controlled, personal hostility to all that is wrong. And a God who cares about injustice is right to be angry about sin, and right to punish it.

God is a God of holiness, of blazing purity, and he hates what is evil. When it comes to evil he doesn't lean back in a rocking chair and pretend nothing has happened. No, evil matters to God. So, lying matters to God, as does selfishness. Likewise, adultery matters to him. Greed matters to him. Stealing matters. Bitterness matters. Murder matters. The deaths caused by suicide bombers matter to God, as do the deaths of those in the World Trade Center, and he will not simply overlook them. Surely if we care about the injustices we see in the world, we cannot expect our loving Creator to care any less.

So, as Jesus was dying on the cross, darkness came over the whole land. God was acting in anger to punish sin.

But that leaves us with a question: Whose sin was God angry

² Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 261.

at? The staggering answer is that God seems to be angry at Jesus.

B. Jesus Was Abandoned (15:34)

The second thing we learn about the significance of the cross is that Jesus was abandoned.

Mark 15:34 says, **“And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”**

Now there is no doubt that Jesus suffered physical agony on the cross. But what is being spoken of here is spiritual agony—being forsaken by God. And the word Jesus uses for **“God”** here is **“Eloi.”** Normally Jesus uses the word “Abba,” which is close to our word “Daddy.” But “Eloi” has none of that warmth or intimacy.

On the cross, Jesus was abandoned by God. It was Jesus that God was punishing. But Jesus had led a sinless life. Not even his fiercest enemies could find any fault with him. So why should God be punishing him? And why has Jesus allowed himself to be subjected to this?

Answer: So that we can be rescued.

How can this be?

Suppose I have a DVD in my hand. And it is a complete record of my entire life. The Bible says in Hebrews 4:13, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

So everything that I have ever done, said and thought is on this DVD. Now the first thing I want to say is that there is lots of stuff on here that is great. There is a loving home, a great wife, wonderful children, kind acts, academic achievements, success on the sports field, and a fulfilling career.

But there is also a lot on this DVD that I am ashamed of. There are things that I would rather people did not see. There are things that I have done of which I am ashamed. And there are also

thoughts that are wrong: bad attitudes, jealousy, bitterness, lust, hatred, and so on. Frankly, I would be terribly ashamed if people saw my attitude towards them.

I recently read a great story about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. He sent a telegram to the twelve most respectable people in London as a joke one night. The telegram read: “Flee—all is revealed.” Within 24 hours, six of the twelve had left the country!

Like them, we all have secrets that we would hate to have exposed. But the Bible tells us that it’s all recorded. And not just the way we’ve treated others, but the way we’ve treated God is also recorded. The Bible’s way of describing what’s on the DVD is “the unfavorable record of our debts” (Colossians 2:14, *The Good News Translation*).

Now let’s suppose that my left hand represents me, and the ceiling represents God. The Bible says that between God and me is this “record of our debts,” and it separates me from God. And I am placing the DVD of my life on top of my upturned left hand.

Now, the Bible says that God is so pure, that even if only one second of my life were recorded on this DVD, it would be enough to separate me from God. My sin cuts me off from God; I am utterly forsaken. But let me illustrate what happens at the cross.

Suppose that my right hand represents Jesus, and remember that the ceiling represents God. As Jesus hung on the cross there was no barrier between him and God. He always perfectly obeyed the will of God. But, while Jesus was on the cross, he took my sin upon himself. [Transfer the DVD from my left hand to my right, upturned hand.]

That’s why Jesus cried out, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” as he hung on the cross. It couldn’t have been *his* sin that made him feel separated from God, because the Bible tells us that Jesus had no sin. No, it was *my* sin that separated him from God. In those agonizing moments, Jesus was taking upon himself all the punishment that my sin, everything on this DVD, deserves. The Bible says, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we

have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). Jesus died as my substitute, in my place, taking the punishment I deserve.

As I now look at my life (represented by my empty left hand), I understand that the result of Jesus’ extraordinary self-sacrifice is simply this: I can be accepted by God. Jesus paid the price for sin so that I never have to. The amazing truth is that Jesus loved me enough to die for my sin. He died for my sin, and for the sin of each person who puts his or her trust in him.

C. We Can Be Accepted (15:37-38)

The third thing we learn about the significance of the cross is that we can be accepted.

Mark 15:37-38 says, **“And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”**

Now, here Mark records the exact moment of Jesus’ death, but then he turns our attention to something that happens simultaneously at the temple, which is on the other side of the city. He wants us to understand that the two events are connected in some way.

When Jesus died, the thirty-foot high curtain in the temple, which was 2 to 3 inches thick, was torn from top to bottom. Why is that significant? Well, this thick curtain used to hang in the temple, dividing the people from the place where God was said to live. The curtain was like a big “Do not enter” sign. It said loudly and clearly that it is impossible for sinful people like you and me to walk into God’s presence.

Then, suddenly, as Jesus died on the cross, God ripped this curtain in two, from top to bottom. It’s as if God was saying: “The way is now open for people to approach me.” And that’s only possible because Jesus has paid the price for our sin.

And it’s not as if Jesus was some innocent third party, being picked on by God. As Paul said in Colossians 1:19, “For in him

[i.e., Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” The remarkable truth is that God himself was making peace with us by willingly sacrificing himself so that we can be accepted by God.

II. Reactions to the Cross

Mark’s description of Jesus’ death focuses not only on Jesus, but also on the reactions of those who witness his death. And it’s interesting to see how they respond.

So, in the second place, I want us to look at reactions to the cross.

A. *Busyness: The Soldiers (15:24)*

The first reaction to the cross is that of busyness. The soldiers are busy.

The soldiers brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.

And this is how they react to the cross in Mark 15:24, **“And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take.”**

For these soldiers, the main legacy of the cross is Jesus’ clothes. They are absorbed in just doing their job. They see nothing special about this man. They’d seen it all before. No doubt they did their job well but, in doing their duty, they missed the true significance of the cross.

There are many people who go through life doing their duty, working hard, saving for the mortgage, raising children, and planning for retirement. Intent on their day-to-day activities, they are too busy to notice what the cross means for them.

B. *Self-Satisfaction: The Religious Leaders (15:31-32)*

The second reaction to the cross is that of self-satisfaction.

The religious leaders are self-satisfied.

Mark tells us that they mocked Jesus among themselves. Look at what they said in Mark 15:31-32, **“So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.’ Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.”**

These self-righteous religious leaders are convinced that they know the way to God, and Jesus Christ is not a part of that route. As far as they’re concerned, they already have a relationship with God. They already consider themselves to be spiritual people, and they certainly see no need for the cross.

It is often those people, who have created their own religion with their own formula of religious or moral observance, who are the most vicious enemies of the cross.

C. Cowardice: Pontus Pilate (15:15)

The third reaction to the cross is that of cowardice. Pontus Pilate is a coward.

Pilate ordered a sign to be attached to the cross. It read: “The King of the Jews.” All the Gospel writers assure us that Pilate was convinced of Jesus’ innocence. He offered to release Jesus, but the crowd wanted a man called Barabbas released instead. Time and again, Pilate stuck up for Jesus. But eventually he handed Jesus over to be crucified. So why did Pilate hand over an innocent man?

Look at Mark 15:15, **“So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.”**

Pilate was a crowd-pleaser. Although he knew that Jesus was innocent, peer pressure caused him to lose his nerve and made him give in to the evil desires of others. Here was a coward who abandoned Jesus. When he faced a world that despised Jesus, his good intentions were overcome.

D. Detachment: The Bystander (15:36)

The fourth reaction to the cross is that of detachment. The bystander is detached.

Mark also records the reaction of some other bystanders. They hear Jesus cry out and think he's calling to Elijah. In Jewish legend Elijah, who was an Old Testament prophet, was celebrated as a helper of those in need.

Then Mark records the reaction of one man in particular. He says this in Mark 15:36, **“And someone ran and filled a 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.’”**

This man just came for the show. He wanted to see Elijah perform some spectacular miracle and rescue Jesus. The sight of Jesus on the cross doesn't move this man at all. Instead, he was totally detached and refused to get involved.

There are lots of people like that. They know about the cross, they come to church at Christmas and Easter for the show, but they don't see how Jesus' death affects them personally.

By showing us all these different reactions, it's as if Mark is saying, “Okay, this is how others responded to what happened at the cross. What about you? What will you make of the cross?”

Are we too busy like the soldiers? Too self-satisfied like the religious leaders? Too cowardly like Pilate? Or are we too detached like the bystander?

There is, however, one other possible reaction to the cross.

E. Belief: The Roman Centurion (15:39)

The final reaction to the cross is that of belief. The Roman Centurion believes that Jesus was “the Son of God.”

Mark records it for us in verse 39. It's the reaction of a Roman centurion, a hard-bitten soldier who was a high-ranking military officer. He had doubtless fought in many campaigns and seen

many men die, but he had never seen a man die like this. This is how Mark describes it in Mark 15:39, **“And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’”**

And that is our final option as we look at what happened at the cross. We can recognize that Jesus is telling the truth: that he is indeed the Son of God.

Conclusion

If you look across the skyline in London you can see the Old Bailey, the home of British justice. On top of it is Pomeroy’s magnificent golden statue of the goddess Justitia holding the scales of justice in one hand and the sword of wrath in the other. She is blindfolded, unable to show partiality, and the message is clear: If we are found to be guilty, then the sword of judgment must fall.

But just across the London skyline, on top of St. Paul’s Cathedral, is another golden symbol. It is a cross—a powerful reminder that the sword of God’s judgment did fall. But it fell on Jesus Christ.

So what will you do with your sin? Will you take it to the cross to be forgiven? Or will you take it with you to the grave and to the judgment that must then fall on you?

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

O God, Mark said that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that he is God in human form. And the reason he came was to rescue rebels. We learn in your Word that we are all rebels, and we are all in great danger of going to hell.

However, Jesus died on the cross to rescue us from the judgment of God. Help us to react to the death of Jesus on the cross like the Roman Centurion—with belief that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, and Savior of sinners such as ourselves.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.