

Let's open our Bibles to **Mark 15** this morning as we prepare ourselves for the Lord's Table by taking a look at the final hours of Jesus' life. As He hung on the cross, **v 26** says, *the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews."*

Do you any of you play chess? If you are a chess player you know that your king must be protected at all costs. If your king is captured, game over. And so it has been throughout history that most kingdoms do anything they can to protect their king, because if the king falls, the kingdom is lost.

June 6, 1944 was D-Day in World War 2. And as the Allied forces planned to invade the beaches of Normandy, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill desperately wanted to watch the battle from the bridge of a battleship in the English Channel. U.S. General Dwight David Eisenhower was desperate to stop him for fear that the Prime Minister might be killed in battle. When Churchill would not be dissuaded, Eisenhower appealed to a higher authority: King George VI. So the king went and told Churchill that if it was the Prime Minister's duty to witness the invasion, he could only conclude that it was also his own duty as king to join him on the battleship. At this point Churchill reluctantly agreed to back down, for he knew that he could never expose the King of England to such danger.

King Jesus, though, did exactly the opposite, for His stated mission was *"not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (**10:45**). This morning we are going to see the royal courage of Jesus Christ, as He surrendered His body to be crucified. On the cross He offered a king's ransom: His life for the life of His people. The terrible cost of this ransom payment is evident in **v 21-39** of **Mark 15**.

**1<sup>st</sup>**, the King is **CRUCIFIED AS A CRIMINAL** (**v 21-28**). Last week we saw that Pilate, the Roman Governor of Palestine sentenced Jesus to be scourged, and then delivered Him over to be crucified.

**17-20** - *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.*

**21-28** - *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 (or 9:00 AM, as the Jews kept time) when they crucified him. 26 And the inscription 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.*

We might find it surprising that the Gospel writers restrain themselves from giving any detailed physical descriptions of what was the most cruel and horrifying form of execution ever invented by humans. They refuse to play on the emotions of the reader, but they simply state with utter objectivity that Jesus "was crucified." Their aim was not to arouse our pity but to awaken our faith. Besides, the original readers had witnessed many crucifixions, so details would have been unnecessary for them. This was such a ghastly procedure anyway that they would not even mention a cross in polite conversation.

But we who wear fancy crosses as jewelry must never become de-sensitized to the harsh reality of what Jesus endured for us. Every totalitarian regime needs a terror apparatus, and crucifixion was Rome's way

of instilling fear into the hearts of people. Crucifixion was a punishment reserved for non-Roman citizens, in which they unleashed excessive cruelty on the lowest and most defenseless classes of society – slaves, violent criminals, prisoners of war.

To increase the sense of humiliation, the victim was usually stripped naked and paraded along crowded streets as a public spectacle. He was forced to carry his own cross, or at least the one hundred pound horizontal beam on which His arms would soon be nailed. In Jesus' case, after several beatings, and with His skin torn from His bones from the brutal scourging He's already received, it is not surprising that Jesus' strength fails on the way to Golgotha.

So the soldiers randomly draft somebody out of the crowd and they force him to carry Jesus' cross. The Romans often imposed this kind of compulsory service on the residents of Palestine and the Jews hated it. But I have often thought what an honor was given to Simon of Cyrene, this man of color from the north coast of Africa. Simon came to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and he ended up meeting the true Passover Lamb. Can you think of a higher privilege than to carry the cross for King Jesus?

This day must have made quite an impression on Simon, because there is evidence in the New Testament that Simon trusted the Savior and went home and led his two sons to the Lord as well, Alexander and Rufus. Or maybe his sons were with him that day and witnessed the whole thing; we don't know.

But apparently the privilege of cross-bearing can be yours and mine as well: For Jesus said, "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*" (8:34-36)

Simon may have been one of the few called to literally fulfill this command, but his example reminds us that discipleship is more than a symbolic gesture, it means following Jesus in real life, "on the way." And Simon further shows us that when you are a committed follower of Jesus, denying yourself to take up a cross, you not only save your life in the end, you may also save your children, who will be influenced by what they see in you: your priorities, lifestyle, and choices, your self-denial and cross-bearing.

With Simon carrying Jesus' cross, *they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull).* (v 22) And in v 23, *they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.* So many of the details Mark chose to report were those that specifically fulfilled Old Testament Scriptures – prophecies which are especially amazing since crucifixion was unknown to the Jews at the time these were written.

Here Jesus is offered a primitive narcotic which was sometimes offered in mercy to deaden the pain of a crucifixion victim. But notice, Jesus will not rely on a painkilling drug as He renders this final act of obedience to God. He wants to be in full possession of His faculties, and He will accept no shortcuts as He offers up the ransom payment. As one writer put it, "Jesus refuses the cup of sympathy so that He might better drink the cup of iniquity."

Then in v 24 we are again simply told, *they crucified him.* Now we're all familiar with the image of a vertical cross, with a nail through each wrist and one through the feet. Archaeologists have actually discovered that the Romans crucified criminals in all sorts of ways and in different postures, according to their sadistic ingenuity – upside down, sideways, with arms and legs twisted in various positions.

Depending on the severity of the scourging beforehand, some victims survived on crosses for several days. Since no major arteries were severed, death came not by blood loss, but usually by asphyxiation, when the victim was no longer able to lift himself up on the nail through his feet in order to breathe.

That's why they sometimes broke the legs of the victim. It was an act of mercy, to hasten their death, because with legs broken, they were no longer able to push themselves up on the nail.

In 1986 the Journal of the American Medical Association carried a complete medical review describing the physical torture involved in a crucifixion. They concluded, "Death by crucifixion was in every sense of the word excruciating," as the weight of the body hanging from nails would damage the medial nerves and tear at the tarsal ligaments, causing intense cramping and respiratory torture.

With Jesus in such agony above them, the soldiers below entertained themselves with a little gambling. They *divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take (v 24)*. By the way, this too was foretold in **Psalm 22**, so it's obvious that as always, God is still in control, even here amidst the greatest evil that has ever occurred on the planet. God's purpose is prevailing.

*With (Jesus) they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left (v 27)*. Barabbas was also called a robber, so these two guys may have been members of his rebel gang. And with Jesus hanging between two convicted criminals, on a cross that was intended for a notorious thief and a murderer –

This too was a fulfillment of prophecy as *He was numbered with the transgressors (Isaiah 53:12)*. Some English translations actually include that quote as **v 28**, and while Luke *does* include it, it's not found in the best Greek manuscripts of Mark, so you may find **v 28** as a footnote in your Bible, instead of in the actual text. But *He was numbered with the transgressors*.

So never think of yourself as beyond the reach of God's mercy, for when your King offered up the ransom payment, He not only identified with sinners, but with the lowest of criminals, though He Himself was innocent of any wrong-doing. The irony is further expanded in the verses that follow, where we see –

**2<sup>nd</sup>**, that the King is **TAUNTED BY HIS ENEMIES. 29-32** - *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.*

The only time Mark departs from his usually reserved and restrained narration is to emphasize the mockery to which Jesus is continually subjected. This is what the Gospel writers find to be most appalling. As we saw last week, Jesus was not only wounded and crushed, He was despised and rejected. The King of the universe was taunted by those for whom He was giving His life.

At His trial, Jesus' opponents were limited to chief priests, Pilate, and the soldiers. But at the crucifixion, these voices merge in a larger chorus of scorn. Anonymous bystanders now join in by hurling their insults at Him. Even the two men suffering the same fate as Jesus can't resist taunting Him – although Luke records that one of these men repents before he dies, and Jesus re-assures him they will be together in glory before the day is over.

Throughout this passage though, the irony is how these scoffers speak far better than they know. In other words, they mock Jesus as "King of the Jews," unaware that each one of them, and everyone else, will bow down before this resurrected man whom they crucified; and they will confess that He is Lord.

Also, they laugh at His claim to rebuild the temple in three days, totally unaware of the fact that He Himself is the real temple, the ultimate meeting-place between God and humans.

Jesus never said He would destroy the temple, only that He would raise it again three days after it was destroyed. *They* were the ones destroying the temple of God, the temple of Christ's body, setting the stage for the fulfillment of Christ's prophecy on Easter morning! If Jesus had come down from the cross to save Himself in response to their challenge, He could not have become the destroyed and rebuilt temple that reconciles men and women to God!

*"He saved others; he cannot save himself,"* they said (v 31). Were they right? Yes... and no! This is a man who voluntarily goes to the cross, and He could free Himself and obliterate His enemies with a mere word. By His Word He made the heavens and the earth! So it's ridiculous to say He can't save Himself. And yet it's true that He couldn't save Himself *and* save others. He saves others by *not* saving Himself. That's the whole point! He gives His life as a ransom for *others*.

*Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe" (v 32).* But what kind of Christ would they then have believed in? A powerful King to be sure. But not the Redeemer, not the Sacrifice, not the Suffering Servant of the Lord who intercedes for sinners.

And they could not have believed in Him for long, because the very basis of salvation and the transformation of lives was His work on the cross which they were taunting Him to abandon. So the mockers spoke the truth unaware. They spoke better than they knew: Because He saves others, He cannot save himself." The King is crucified as a criminal. He is taunted by His enemies.

And 3<sup>rd</sup>, and worst of all, the King is **FORSAKEN BY THE FATHER**. 33-36 - *And when the sixth hour had come (or 12 noon), there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour (3:00 PM). 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."*

For three hours the people of Jerusalem are surrounded by a miraculous darkness that covers the land. It's as if all of creation is sympathizing with the Creator as He suffers.

The prophet Amos spoke of this sign: *"And on that day," declares the Lord God, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight" (8:9).* What was God saying here to the people?

For one thing, the Jews might associate this event with the first Passover. The ninth plague in Egypt was a darkness which lasted not three hours, but three days (Exo 10:22). This was followed by the last plague, the death of the firstborn. So the darkness at Calvary meant that God's Firstborn and Beloved Son, was giving His life as a spotless Lamb to take away the sins of the world. And it was also an announcement that judgment was coming. But in God's mercy, on this day His wrath was falling, not on guilty sinners, but on the innocent Son.

When Jesus cried, out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (v 34)* – He was quoting the first verse of **Psalm 22**, identifying with the righteous sufferer from whom God has turned His face. The onlookers didn't understand these words. They thought He was calling for Elijah the prophet.

But at that very moment, Jesus became a curse for us, *for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Gal 3:13; cf Dt 21:23).* Wave after wave of the world's sin was poured over Christ's sinless soul. Think of every time you have sinned in thought, word, or deed, and then multiply that by millions, and imagine bearing in your own body the holy wrath of God Almighty for all those transgressions. Who can imagine the hell Jesus experienced as the punishment that brought us peace fell upon Him?

*For our sake (God) made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in (Christ) we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).* God's holy nature demanded separation as the Son became sin for us. And this is the dreadful moment Christ foresaw in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He said, "If possible, let this cup pass from Me." God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had never known one millisecond of broken fellowship from all eternity. But the fellowship was broken right here –

As the Father *did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all (Rom 8:32).* For His part, the Son submitted to the Father's will and continued to trust in Him. "My God, my God," He cries out.

**Isaiah 50:10** says, *Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.*

If you're walking in darkness and it seems that God has hidden His face from you, don't give in to despair. God allowed His own Son to suffer more than you'll ever suffer, but it didn't mean that the Father was powerless or that He no longer cared for the Son. So keep trusting in the name of the Lord and never doubt His love for you. Even if you don't feel it or see it, rely on your God and the promises of His Word, just as Jesus trusted in His Father through the darkness of the cross.

Though crucified as a criminal, taunted by His enemies, and forsaken by the Father, 4<sup>th</sup>, the King is finally **REVEALED AS THE SON OF GOD** in v 37-39 - *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 the Son of God!"*

Hmm. The very first verse of Mark's Gospel identifies Jesus Christ as the Son of God (1:1). At His baptism and transfiguration the Father has called Him His beloved Son (1:11; 9:7). On several occasions the demons have acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God (1:24; 3:11; 5:9). At His trial the high priest asked Jesus if He was the Son of God, and Jesus said, "I am." (14:61-62).

But in Mark's Gospel, until now, no human, not even His disciples, has made this confession of faith. In fact, until now, Jesus has stifled all speculations about His identity because they were all premature. He did not want to stimulate false hopes among zealous Jews who wanted to overthrow the Romans. Before His death on the cross no one could truly understand what "Son of God" actually means.

Yet now that the King's ransom payment has been made, the Gospel of Mark reaches its climax here in v 39 – and the profession of faith comes not from a disciple or even a fellow Jew. It's a Gentile outsider, the captain of the execution squad, and thus an enemy – who first declares Jesus as God's Son.

We're told the centurion came to this conclusion when He saw the way Jesus died. Usually the crucified man fell unconscious through a progressive loss of strength, and he died feebly. But Jesus was conscious to His very last breath, just as He had determined to be when He refused the narcotics.

And Jesus *uttered a loud cry when He breathed His last (v 37).* This must have surprised the centurion. What did Jesus say? According to **John**, Jesus cried out "*It is finished*" (19:30). According to **Luke**, Jesus then called out with a loud voice, saying, "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!*" (23:46). You see, Jesus *gave* His life; it was not taken. Jesus was not murdered; He willingly laid down His life.

And when He breathed His last, *The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom (v 38).* Imagine what pious Jews in town for the Passover were thinking as the veil into the Holy of Holies was supernaturally slashed in two as if by a great sword. Only the high priest could only go into the Holy of Holies, and only once a year, but now the way was wide-open for all who believe in Jesus Christ.

He is the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him, the true temple of God (**John 14:6**). This means through Jesus we all have access into God's presence by faith in Him.

*Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith (**Hebrews 10:19-22**).*

So what do you say? Will you trust in the blood that was shed by Jesus as a ransom payment for your sins? Will you believe that the King allowed His own flesh to be torn in order to open up a way for you to enter His kingdom? Will you confess that this Jesus is truly the Son of God?

If you will, then you are coming into line with the unanimous witness of the New Testament. You are lining up with the one reality that is acknowledged in heaven and in hell – the one thing on which heaven and hell agree! You are agreeing with the testimony of Jesus about Himself. You are echoing the confession of the centurion who saw Him breathe His last breath, and you are identifying yourself with the faith of every true Christian.

And this is a faith we proclaim and nourish every time we share in the Lord's Table. As those who are serving us take their places now and the worship team comes, I invite you to bow your head and settle this issue once and for all in your own life. Through His Word, God has revealed the truth about Jesus.

Will you say, "God, reveal the truth to my heart. Open my eyes that I might perceive who Jesus is. Give me faith to believe, a heart to receive, and a will to submit to the King of kings who paid my ransom." The Bible says, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household*" (**Acts 16:31**).