

The Willing Sacrifice

Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Mark 15:21-47

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...Mark 15:21-47, that recounts the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. And as I read this morning and as I preach I want to ask that you keep in the back of your mind the following question. How is my pride doing? If this text does not challenge us in our pride, we are not listening. To hear this text read and to study it together is a confrontation of the pride which we have within all of us. It may look different from one person to the next, but it is pride, nonetheless, either in ourselves or in our actions. And if it's not in ourselves or in our actions, our pride is located in something else. And our pride, our dependence on ourselves, our actions, or on something else—we look to that to give us life. But in this passage our pride is challenged to place our hope and confidence in something else.

So hear now God's word about the work of Christ on our behalf. Mark 15:21-47, "The Willing Sacrifice."

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 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. 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.

⁴² And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. ⁴⁵ And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. ⁴⁶ And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid. [ESV]

This is the Word of God. (Thanks be to God.) Please pray with me. What grace, what mercy, what salvation you have displayed for us. May your word, by the power of your Holy Spirit, enable us to see the beauty of Jesus Christ. The scandal of the cross, but the power of salvation. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

You will see in your outline that I have outlined the text according to the events, but as it happens it is also the same order of the Apostles' Creed. He was **Crucified, Died, And Was Buried**. This is what is before us.

So let us begin with **Crucified**. He was crucified. And as you think of the words that Jesus taught, recorded for us in the Gospel of John, where he proclaims, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Now watch how even those words can find parallel in the events as they unfold in this passage. He was crucified. The way. The way of life went the way of the cross. What is interesting is that it is Mark who decides not to get into the gory details of the crucifixion—because they are many. It was painful and even rarely used among the Romans. But when it was, it was for the vilest of offenders, because it was the vilest of deaths. As John Owen, the great Puritan pastor and preacher, would say: This is the death of death. This is the way. Jesus, the Way, went to be crucified on a cross.

And when I was last with you, the passage on which I preached had these words from Jesus's mouth: "The hour has come." The first thing to see about the crucifixion is it did not happen by surprise. Jesus willingly went the way of the cross. Why is this important? This is important because it wasn't as though Jesus was simply out teaching with his disciples and was caught unaware. Rather, as we've walked through the Gospel of Mark you see the closer and closer that we've got to Jesus's arrest, the more and more Jesus was willing to be revealed and to proclaim who he was and what he had come to do. And the more that he did that, the more we saw he was becoming isolated. The more that he did that the more we saw the tension rising from those who were against him, those who were opposing him. But Jesus did all of this by design. Why? Because Jesus recognized this was the will of the Father.

And so Jesus said if it be your will, take this cup from me. But Jesus understood that he could simultaneously pray that prayer, because his desire was not to be separated from the Father, but he was willing if that was the Father's will. So to look at the willingness of the crucifixion, it

has two faces to it. It has the face of God the Father, as well as the face of Christ. He willingly gave of himself. The Father willingly gave up his Son. Does that begin to knock on the door of your pride? You cannot read this and not ask the question why. The Scriptures simply tell us that our sin must be paid for. And yet God in his grace does not seek us out with his judgment, but rather sends his Son.

The why is twofold. Another human had to take on our sin. Willingly Christ, who was perfect, became the only sacrifice, because the sacrifice had to be pure. Otherwise he was just like us. He was like us in the flesh, but he willingly obeyed perfectly and was without sin, without blemish. Christ willingly came as a sacrifice and he died. And the Father does so, because the Scriptures tell us: "For God so loved the world..." [Jesus] willingly went to the cross. The Father willingly gave his Son because of his love and because of his justice.

[Jesus] was crucified as the way because he was willing. He was crucified as the way because he was meant to suffer. And that suffering is the suffering of God's wrath, as we've looked at before. God's wrath upon sin. God does not set aside his wrath. He does not water it down. Rather it is on full display as Christ ~~was~~ willingly gave himself over to his captors—without sword, without violence, but willingly gave himself over to be punished as a common criminal. As a common sinner. He was willing to suffer every lash, every mocking, every word of derision. Is not by chance. It was designed so that Christ as the suffering servant would take every last drop that ~~which~~ was due to us. And this was the end. The end was so that you and I might have life. Someone had to pay. Someone had to die. And God says it will be my Son, so that we do not have to suffer this death, though we deserve it.

And so here's the question with regard to our pride. We cannot escape the reality of gravity. We face it every day. It can be a help and a friend, and it can be a cruel master. Gravity can lead us to some pretty incredible things, but it can also lead to a lot of pain. The question is by asking what and how is your pride, really it is the answer to what is your gravitational pull? What are you drawn to? This text displays God's love in the crucifixion of his Son—the Way, the Truth and the Life—so that we might see, as sinful human beings, that our gravitational pull should be drawn to Christ the Son, to our heavenly Father who loves us. But our pride wells up within us and our gravitational pull takes us away and turns us away from the Father and the Son, and turns us towards ourselves.

A family member last week was asking me why they were experiencing suffering. And they began to argue why they should not be experiencing suffering. And they said to me I've been the good kid. I have two master's degrees. I've gone to church all my life. I've gone to Sunday school. I've been, and I've heard the sermons. I try to do good by other human beings. Yes, I smoked pot in college, but I don't do that anymore. And at one level I kind of chuckle, but at another level I'm hurting for this person. Because what becomes clear is all of that time in the church, all of that time of hearing these things, did not take the gravitational pull of their life and pull them towards Christ. Rather that gravitational pull was actually set on themselves. This is what I've done. This is what I've accomplished. Why am I suffering? And we began to have a brief conversation in the middle of a birthday party that don't you see, if our gravitational pull is on our actions, on our performance, who would be left standing? If God grades on our performance were only as good as our last success. But what we cannot escape is our failure. Is that how you're grading yourself? Where is your pride? Because this passage calls out to us: Don't you see our lives deserve God's wrath, but, rather, lay down your pride and see that

Christ, who is our Savior, was crucified in our place so that we might have life.

Dr. Timothy Keller, in preaching a sermon on this particular text, says: If in fact our gravitational pull is towards ourself and our performance, it will not lead to life; it will lead to disintegration. He says: Because when God returns, he will judge every action, every thought, every longing, everything our heart has ever produced. And if there is anything imperfect, then we will not be able to remain in his presence. And being out of the presence of God—who is all light, all truth—means utter darkness and eternal disintegration. This will be our trajectory, he says, and Jesus's death was the only way to alter our trajectory. This is why Jesus had to go to the cross. He fell into complete darkness for which we were headed. He died the death we should have died, so that we can be saved from this judgment and instead live in the light and presence of God. To live in the light and the presence of God. This is why The Way was crucified, so that we might have our gravitational pull and center be altered—not towards ourselves, not towards eternal judgment, but to the light and salvation through Christ. And so the willing sacrifice was crucified. But hear this: Jesus knew what he was doing.

He then **Died**, the passage tells us. And in this moment he proclaims, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The truth, that is Christ would die. And this is both the beauty and the scandal of the cross. Isn't it rather ironic that at the moment in which Jesus is passing away, he cries out to the Father—to the one he most loves and the one the Father most loves—and he says, “Why have you forsaken me?” What does that actually mean? It means—that if you can imagine, those of you who are married and those of you who have someone you absolutely, dearly love more than anything else—if that person were to come to you and say I no longer love you, and I no longer want to be in your presence. Now some of you may know what that feels like. But this is precisely what Jesus is crying out. The Father is turning his back on the Son so that justice may be satisfied, so that sin may be atoned for.

But isn't it ironic that after this happens Jesus breathes his last. They could see that he was dying. They wonder if—as the text tells us—whether Elijah would come and save him. They were already mocking him. And when Jesus dies, the text tells us in verse 38, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” So at Jesus's death two things happened. This is the first. This curtain was not a thin veil. It was an extremely heavy, thick cloth that was from top to bottom, and it was to shield the Holy of Holies where the symbolic presence of God was and the Ark of the Covenant. And in that place during the Day of Atonement only the high priest—after offering sacrifices for himself—would go into the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifice, to atone for the sins of the nation of Israel. But they would have to have a rope tied to him in the event that he did not survive because he had failed in some way, and they would have to drag him out. No one [else] was allowed to go in. No other person. No people other than the high priest, and only after he offered sacrifice for his sins. But there is one thing he could not do. He could not—the high priest could not open the veil for everyone to see.

And what happens in this passage at the death of Jesus, the curtain over the Holy of Holies is torn apart from top to bottom. And there's only one way that could happen. Because it was God in his power doing it, acknowledging that the payment for sin was finished. And now the real, the true high priest, who did not have to offer sacrifices for himself, but was perfect and became the willing sacrifice—had died and gone into the Holy of Holies and received God's wrath. And in so doing made sacrifice for everyone who would come to him by faith. This is the act of God saying it is finished. We now can come to God because the sacrifice has been made.

This is both the beauty, but it is also the scandal. Because the only way this could happen is this Jesus was both fully God and fully man. He had to be the Son of God. And that's the second thing that happens. The Centurian—and the very first time a human voice utters these words in the Gospel of Mark is here. The first time. Not the disciples, not the women. No one else but this Centurian who was charged with the duty of overseeing the death of Jesus. It would be the Centurian who would say, “Truly this man was the Son of God.”

Now that just rolls off our tongues, doesn't it. Because we can't appreciate in context historically how utterly impossible that would be for anyone to voice. And particularly a Roman. And particularly the Centurian. Why? Because on every coin, Roman coin, what did it say? It was Caesar who was the Son of God. But now the Roman soldier, who had risen through the ranks of unlisted men, gotten to this place, charged with overseeing the death of Christ—now is the very first one who says this was surely the Son of God. What he saw happen before him did more than just challenge his pride. For him to utter these words, it ended him. The Way and The Truth has been crucified and has died.

John Stott, in a sermon called, “Naked Pride,”—John Stott being perhaps one of the greatest preachers of the twentieth century. He's no longer with us, but he wrote these words. He says: As we stand before the cross we begin to gain a clearer view both of God and of ourselves, especially in relationship to each other. Instead of inflicting upon us the judgment we deserve, God in Christ endured it in our place. Hell is the only alternative. This is the scandal, the stumbling block of the cross, for our proud hearts rebel against it. We cannot bear to acknowledge either the seriousness of our sin and guilt or our utter indebtedness to the cross. Surely, we say, there must be something we can do or at least contribute in order to make amends. If not, we often give the impression that we would rather suffer our own punishment than the humiliation of seeing God through Christ bear it in our place.

And that is the question. If the Son of God was crucified and died, what are we doing with our pride? Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. And the cross is before us. Would we rather suffer punishment then give up our pride and recognize an indebtedness of thanksgiving to Christ our Savior. This is the question.

And the passage ends with saying he died **And Was Buried**. And so we read of Joseph of Arimathea, who was willing to make sure that Jesus had a burial place. Joseph, recognizing who Jesus was and what he had done, this is his response. But we see that the life... As I said, The Way was crucified, The Truth died, and now The Life was buried. But he was buried in a common grave. There is not much else here I can elaborate on. This is Christ, the Son of God, buried. And those who were closest to him, the disciples, were not close [by]. So he's laid with a simple shroud. And the two women knew where he was buried.

This is meant to be the conclusion for that which should stand before us, as that which it is meant to declare. And I cannot at all outdo one of the great church fathers, Saint Augustine, when he says. . . This is one of my favorite passages. If you want to read of it or whatever, I'll see if there's a way I can post it. It is very meaningful to me. I've read it here before. I apologize for the repetition.

The maker of man was made man. The ruler of the stars might suck at the breast. That the bread might be hungered. That the fountain thirst. The light sleep. The way be wearied by the journey. The truth be accused by false witnesses. The judge of the living and the dead be judged by a mortal judge. The chastener be chastised with whips. The vine be crowned with thorns. The foundation be hung upon the tree. The strength be made weak. Health be wounded. Life and die. To suffer these and such like things, undeserved things, that he might free the undeserving. For neither did he deserve any evil, who for our sakes endured so many evils. Nor were we deserving of anything good, we who through him have received such good.

For Christ to be buried means that if the Son of the Living God has died in a way of the crucifixion, we are offered the way so that we might not suffer the wrath of God. That the truth might die, so that we would not experience death in the way that Jesus experienced it. And to be buried means that we do not any longer declare that we are slaves to the grave, because we are not. We are not slaves to death. We are not to be called out because we are trusting in ourselves and therefore stand before the Righteous and Holy Father to deserve his wrath. No, we are free. We are free to be a people of rejoicing and praise, and may our words never grow silent to say that The Way, The Truth, and The Life has gone before us. We are free from the performance that the world calls us to. We are free from trying to find our ultimate sustenance in another relationship which can never provide. We are free from the failures that so often lurk in the back of our minds, trying to encourage us to keep doing more. We are free from that. We are free from saying that death and the grave is the end of the story. Why? Because of the willing sacrifice of Jesus, the Son of the Living God.

How is our pride?. Because, you see, when we look at the cross as it is, our pride is deconstructed, and it is replaced by a hope, a joy, a freedom that is indescribable. Do you know that have you experienced it? Have you tasted of it? It is offered to you in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If you are a believer or you are considering becoming one because you see the beauty of the cross.

And there are two things I would call us to this morning. First, what Paul says in Philippians Chapter 2. "Having the same mind," meaning our pride is replaced by humility. "Having the same mind of Christ, who gave up his glory that he might take on human flesh." Who gave up his glory that he might receive an ignoble death, yet have victory. "Have the same mind," to say not my works. Not what I can do can make amends. Not what I can do can satisfy what my soul most longs for. But Christ alone. And that humbles us.

The second is obedience. That if Christ who has gone before us, was crucified, died, and was buried, then we have one who has gone before us, who has paid the price. And now what we receive in return is a freedom that no one or no thing can ever take from us. And it gives us a freedom in life to do what God has gifted us to do, but to do it according to him and to give him glory through it. Whether you're an engineer, a stay at home parent, whether you are young or you are old. Regardless of your station in life, we can walk in obedience. And in all that we do, doing it unto him who is our Savior.

Hear these words from Hebrews Chapter 2: "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom and everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them (to call you) brothers.

He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.' And again, 'I will put my trust in him.' And again he says, 'Here I am, and the children God has given me.'" [Hebrews 2:10-13, NIV]

Jesus, because of his work—God, because of his willingness to give his Son—looks at you and declares you his children. And he invites you, "Come unto me!" because of his love. What is your response? Do you see the joy and the freedom that comes through the cross? The writer of Hebrews says, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death ." [Hebrews 2:14-15, NIV] Do you know what the fear of death does to people? Do you know what it can do to you? Do you know what it can do to me? It can make us very much bent on trying to do everything by our own strength to escape death. To build a legacy! To make a mark! To make a difference! We can be united to Christ who has made all the difference. That gives us a freedom not to serve ourselves or our names. No, Lord, to your name be the glory.

And if you will allow me, I finish with this testimony. His name is Josef Tson. His wife is Elizabeth. They're a pastor and his wife and family. He grew up and was raised in communist Romania. While a young man, however, Josef became a Christian through the work of a local small Baptist church. And in the late 1960's he would take the opportunity to attend theology college at Oxford. He told his friends that after graduation he planned to return to the place where God was calling him, and that was to return to communist Romania to minister the Gospel in the same small Baptist church where he was converted. They said you cannot be serious. And he says oh, no, I'm very serious. And so he did. And in the four years, when he went back to Romania and ministered in this small Baptist church, the Lord had done a wonderful work of revival. In the first four years 850 new converts were baptized. But not only was it drawing the power and work of the Holy Spirit, it also began to draw the attention of the Romanian government, and they began to pressure him not to preach. He had his weak moments. He was tempted to be more quiet, maybe to be a little bit more hesitant. But over time the Holy Spirit began to minister to him through the word, and that word was the passage which I just read to you: Hebrews Chapter 2:10-15. He was brought up on interrogation on several occasions by the secret police of Nicolai Ceausescu, who was the communist leader of Romania. He and his family were interrogated for several hours. He was then told to remain in a room with one security guard, who began to beat him with his fists. This was the pressure being placed on Josef. But it was those words—of not being a slave to death any longer, that Christ who died, Christ who was crucified and was buried—became his hope. That he was no longer a slave to death and no longer feared suffering. And that gave him the freedom and a humility to walk in obedience. They confiscated his entire library. There were times where they were fearing for their very lives, including their eighteen month old daughter. And after reading the devotional of this passage it began to radically alter the way in which they would respond to the interrogation and to the suffering. At that very moment, they write, that the fear of death was removed. They knew that because they belong to Jesus, death no longer... death itself no longer held them in slavery. They were ready to die. They both said to God we are yours. Whenever you want us to die, we are ready. From that time forward they never feared. They never lost any sleep and lived in perfect peace.

A year or so later the head of the secret police came to Josef and offered him a very lucrative job, hopefully trying to get him out of the pulpit. He understood the motivation, but he said I know I am going to make you angry or I'm going to make God angry, depending on whether I keep preaching or take your job. I would rather make you angry than God, so I refuse to take the job you are offering me. He went on to say now I am ready to die. You said you were going to finish me as a preacher. I asked my God and he wants me to continue to be a preacher. But I know you, sir, you cannot stand this kind of opposition, and you will kill me in one way or another. But I accepted that, and you should know that I have put everything in order and am ready to die. But as long as I am free I will preach the Gospel. Josef says that the man's countenance changed immediately, and instead of anger and hostility the man calmly said no one will ever harm you again. And indeed no one ever bothered him again. And even though the authorities would continue to threaten him, he would say sir, don't you understand that when you kill me, you will send me to glory? You cannot threaten me with glory. The more suffering, the more troubles, the greater the glory. Your supreme weapon, he said, is killing, my supreme weapon is dying. You know that my sermons are on tape all over this country. You can shoot me or crush me whichever way you choose, but you will sprinkle blood on every sermon that I have ever preached. Everybody who has a tape of one of my sermons will pick it up and say I had better listen to this again; this man died for what he preached. Sir, my sermons will speak ten times louder than you after you have killed me. In fact, my sermons will speak far louder. This country will be conquered for God because you kill me. So go ahead and do it. Dying for the Lord is not an accident. It's not a tragedy. It's a part of the job. It's a part of the ministry. And it's the greatest way of preaching.

Josef, freed from the fear of death through the crucifixion of Christ, would go on to preach and minister. Finally the Romanian government would exile him. Well, they thought they were doing themselves a favor. They didn't, for Josef and his family would end up in the United States during the time of President Ronald Reagan, who at the time was trying to get Radio Free Europe up and running. And so the name of Josef Tson reached the president's desk, and they gave him an hour-long preaching program on Radio Free Europe. And his sermons would continue to be preached around Romania, until fortunately the Iron Curtain was torn down.

This story is not the story of bravery of a preacher. It is the story of a man who was freed from pride and led into humility, and recognized that the glory of the Son had given him a freedom no one could touch. And he could walk in obedience, not fearing man, but trusting Christ. How is your pride this morning? What is your trust? May it be in the willing sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let's pray. Make us a people, by your Spirit, who see the beauty of our Savior. May Jesus [be] more beautiful to our sight this morning than ever before. Whether we profess Christ or we have not yet professed Christ, I ask you, by your Spirit, fall fresh upon us this morning. That Christ, who is our life, would reign supreme in our hearts, in our imagination, and by faith may we be united anew or united for the first time this morning to Christ our Lord. And may that union and faith in his death on our behalf free us and make us a people of humility and a people of obedience who can in earnestness and humility say my life is not my own. It has been bought and paid for by the precious blood of Christ. May your will be done in us and not our will. Now Lord, make us have people of praise, of joy, and freedom. In the one and only name, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.