

Simon of Cyrene

Last 24 Hours of Christ

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You know, back in the day they would say, "And all God's people said..." Amen. Absolutely.

Let me encourage you this morning to open your Bibles to the gospel of Mark 15. As you're turning to the gospel of Mark 15, if you're a guest or visitor with us, let me welcome you to a very strategic journey through the word of God. This isn't a journey through a respective gospel or even the totality of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, but spending an inordinate amount of time on that which the gospels spend the majority of their time. Almost half of the content of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John take place during the last couple of weeks of Jesus' life and ministry but strategically there is an enormous amount of time and detail given to those last 24 hours and last week we were at the midway point so from this moment on, the clock is ticking in those last some hours toward his eventual death and three days later his resurrection.

One of the things that we've said the last few weeks is this, that as we get closer and closer to that time of his death upon the cross, the content of scripture is going to get more and more focused and no so more by example today than Mark 15. We're going to be introduced to a character, to an individual whose name is necessarily a part of the crucifixion story, in fact, it is difficult to share the entirety of the story without naming him by name, however, he gets one single solitary verse. In a moment we're going to be introduced to a man by the name of Simon the Cyrene. He's mentioned in Matthew and Luke as well, but in no place in the gospel account does he get more than one verse. So even though we're just going to read one verse, we're going to peel the layers away and let me remind you that as we walk through this verse answering some very necessary and strategic questions, we're going to conclude with the "why." Why is this so important for us? And one of the things that we've discovered through each of these events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ that cannot be left in the pages of history 2,000 years ago, they speak to what we're walking through today and maybe most importantly they also speak to what is coming in the days ahead.

Mark 15:21. Jesus had been in Pilate's place. He has been beaten. He has been mocked. He has been harassed both verbally and physically and in verse 21 there's this very simple profound statement,

21 And they compel one Simon a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear his cross.

That's all we've got for this individual who is so integral to the story of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

So let's begin. When does this story take place? Now I know on a constructed timeline, we're coming out of Pilate's palace, we're making our way to what we know as the Way of Suffering. The Jewish trial is over. The Roman trial is over. Death has been pronounced upon him and it is Golgotha that lies before him. But the "when" part today that I want to focus on is this fact, that the journey from the front steps of Pilate's palace unto the place that we refer to as Calvary or Golgotha by a very slow deliberate standard is no more than a 15 minute journey. That's it. In fact, if the obstructions made by man were out of the way, you could see Golgotha from the front steps of Pilate's palace. Why is this significant? Because everything that we're going to unpack today, everything we're going to discuss about this individual and his life, particularly this one moment, takes place in just 15 minutes. We've talked about 24 hours leading up to the death and eventually three days later the resurrection of Jesus Christ, here is a man, as we'll see in a moment, in the city of Jerusalem with his two sons and 15 minutes worth of time will change not only his life but all of our lives for eternity.

So who's involved here? Well, we've got to begin with who this Simon is. Interesting that in all three gospel accounts where he is named by name, it mentions that he is a Cyrenian. He is from Cyrene. And so allow me to give you a little geography there. Cyrene is basically northern Libya on the coastline of North Africa. This is going to come into play significantly later in the message but let me share with you an incredible current-day relevance to this story. Cyrene no longer exists. Like many places in scripture, the toils of war and powers and kingdoms that tend to overturn themselves has seen that city go by the wayside but there's a very modern city that has "risen from the ashes" of ancient Cyrene. You've heard of it: Benghazi. Modern-day Benghazi is where Simon was from. He made a journey eastward, a very long journey to Jerusalem.

Now there are many that have speculated, "Well, Simon was just on a business trip and he happened to be at the 'right place at the proverbial wrong time.'" Here's the issue with that: Passover is taking place. This isn't just a "day's worth of celebration," this is an entire week's worth of celebration and anybody who knew anything about traveling, which if he'd been a businessman he would have, knows you don't go through Jerusalem during Passover. It's kind of like if you're going to travel to the northeast of where we are and someone asks you how far is it, you say it's four hours plus Atlanta because none of us have any clue how long it's going to take you to get through that city. And yet you would testify, as I would, that there are times during the day that you don't drive in certain places in our community much less larger ones because you know how congested it will be. Simon wasn't in Jerusalem because he was making a financial deal. Simon was in Jerusalem because about a thousand years earlier the message of God through a man by the name of King Solomon made its way to the continent of Africa through a woman

by the name of the Queen of Sheba, and not only in his days but in subsequent days there has been a significant Jewish population in this part of the world. This is critical to the story because Simon was in Jerusalem not to "make money" but to offer a sacrifice to the God that he believed in.

So you've got Simon on a "religious pilgrimage," and you've got his two sons. Interesting that they're both named: Alexander and Rufus. And for those of you who want to run the verses in the concordance and such, there is significant belief that his son Alexander is the Alexander that's mentioned in Acts 19:33, and his son Rufus is the Rufus that's mentioned in the book of Romans 16:13. You say, "Why is that so significant?" How would your life have changed if you were a young man and you not only saw your dad carry a cross down the street but you saw the anguish in the face of Jesus when he offered himself on the cross? These two young men in a 15 minute time frame received an education that 15 years of formal process cannot accomplish.

Then there's the proverbial "they." Don't you love when the Bible uses the word "they"? It says, "And they compel one Simon." Well, the "they" there are these Roman soldiers. These are those who at Pilate's orders not only inflicted harm physically, mentally, socially, as they mocked him, they made fun of him, they put the crown of thorns upon his head, they draped him in a purple garb to ridicule him and to be sarcastic toward him. He was placed out in front of the public and they cried, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" They took him back, beat him again for extra measure, and then they "drug him into the street." Who were the "they"? These are Roman mercenaries. Why is this important? Because when it says they compelled him to bear the cross, they did not ask nicely. He did not receive the opportunity to sit down over a cup of coffee and say, "Well, allow me to look at the pros and cons of this opportunity and adventure." When it says they compelled him, they forced it upon him, they threw it upon him. He was "compelled." He wasn't asked if he was willing. It took place irrespective of how he felt about it.

It's an interesting set of characters. You've got a man in Jerusalem who simply wanted to worship the Lord on one of the most special weeks of the calendar year. You had two sons probably early in their teenage years following along just learning what it looks like from their own dad. Then these men who put their family in an incredibly precarious position. Then there's the "where." Where did it take place? Well, I've already somewhat addressed this, that the location between Pilate's palace and what we know as Golgotha or Calvary not only was about a 15 minute walk at the slowest of paces but it would have been one of the busiest if not the busiest thoroughfares in all of Jerusalem. You see, this was the time not just where those who had the ability to, this was the time where all Jewish people descended on Jerusalem. In fact, if you've ever been a part of a modern Passover meal or a seder meal, when it ends they always close with, "Next year in Jerusalem." That is where you want to celebrate Passover. And remember just a few days earlier with what we know as Palm Sunday it said tens of thousands were there saying, "Blessed is he who has come in the name of the Lord."

There is no telling what that "human traffic jam" would have looked like. This was not a place on the outskirts of nowhere that one could just mind their own business. No. Simon

was compelled to bear the cross in the most populated, most dense, most heavily trafficked street in all of the city on the one day where more people would be there than any other day on the calendar. So it begs us to ask the question: what took place? Let me begin by giving you a very unique perspective. I'm going to read verse 21 again. I know it's a short verse and it's easy to read. It says, "And they compel one Simon a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear his cross." Here's the perspective I want you to see: find for me anywhere and I challenge you all day long to study all three gospel accounts, find anywhere where Simon argued. Find anywhere where he declared, "I need my attorney and I need him fast." In fact, there's no arguing, there's no pushback. Does that not seem odd to you? Here is a man minding his own business when all of a sudden he is forced to carry a death instrument of his day down the road in front of his own two kids, and he doesn't say a word. His perspective is incredibly unique. He doesn't argue. He doesn't gripe. He doesn't complain. He simply just bears it. That will come into play in just a moment.

But let me give you a picture. You know, though the Roman "they," the soldiers, probably were not thinking in terms of biblical foundations, the Bible says in Deuteronomy 32 as well as Galatians 3, "Cursed is he who hangs on a tree." And even though those soldiers at Pilate's disposal, even though they didn't have a biblical foundation and even though they were not thinking of the "Hebrew scriptures," allow me to share with you the picture they had of Simon in their mind. They were Romans. He was from modern-day Libya. He would have looked different. He would have talked different. And not only would he have an appearance that was different than theirs, the fact that he was in Jerusalem at Passover, he would have been dressed differently. What did they do? Can I share with you what they did? They profiled him. They profiled and said, "That is an individual who is cursed." You see, you didn't place a cross just on anybody, you didn't just grab some random person and say, "Oh, he looks strong enough to do this, let's grab him." You didn't put a cross on anybody unless they had been formally or unknowingly condemned to be cursed. Why him? I mean, after all, there are tens of thousands of people. They could have picked anybody but they compelled Simon.

You remember later in the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul there was a time where he's in prison and he raised his hand and he said, "Guys, this may not be a good idea. I'm a Roman citizen." And they said, "Oh, time out. We can't do this to a Roman citizen." So they understood their own but Simon, they could have picked him out in the proverbial crowd being from another country, most likely speaking another language, and most definitively being dressed in the regalia of the very one who was being summonsed to the cross.

You know it's incredibly prophetic. Years earlier Luke 9, Jesus makes this grand powerful statement. He says, "If any man come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me." Now I can imagine that he's sitting by the campfire there, he's got the apostles around him and he's speaking of that. I'm sure their first thought was, "He's being metaphorical. He's speaking in language to show us the importance of what's taking place." No, no, no. He was being prophetic. He said that, "If you believe in and follow me, you will bear a cross." And here before Jesus Christ even goes on "his cross," there's

one that has been compelled to bear it, and let me remind you, Jesus said, "If anybody follow me, let him take up his cross," in Simon's case and in sometimes even our cases, we don't elect to pick it up, it is placed upon us because of whose we claim to be.

So what's taking place? Fifteen minutes that would change the course of Simon's life, his sons' lives and all of our lives. He looked, spoke, acted and dressed differently and so those that were commissioned with the sentence of death picked him out of the crowd and said, "You are the one that we're going to put this burden on." Now why is his story so important for us? You need to understand the perspective. Take yourself back to the day that we've studied already, this Jesus of Nazareth has come in days earlier on Palm Sunday declaring to be the messianic figure, the Messiah of the Jewish people. The average Jewish individual has celebrated this. Those in power and position were completely contrary to this. It has stirred up the city so much so that when Pilate heard that Jesus was from Galilee, he gladly said, "Well, I know a guy named Herod who is technically your 'governor,' why don't you go to him because I would love not to have to deal with you because this is about to divide us, split us, and create some chaos here." Herod received him and said, "Hey, Jesus, do a miracle." When he would do nothing, he sent him back to Pilate. You have a divided, chaotic culture that is before them.

So what's the perspective? Isn't it interesting that our culture has not, shall we say, progressed in 2,000 years? You do realize what took place in Simon's life is what takes place in our lives as well. I joked earlier that he was "profiled" but is that not what we do? Humanity more than ever today begins to separate and segment us into respective groups. Now this is important for us to understand. Whether you know it or not, you're in a group not because you "signed up" to be in that group but because others have claimed you're in that group. We live in a world today that is divided between two major groups, us and them, and the question is which side of the "proverbial line" are you on? Can I give you a hint? If you're not in charge, you're them. If you are, you're the "us." But even within the group dynamics of our culture, what do we do? We subdivide so that within a certain group we have this group and that group and this propensity and that propensity. What did they do to Simon? They placed him in a group based on his appearance, based on his speech, based on his behavior, his dress, and his faith. He was placed in a group.

So can I give you a picture this morning? What did these Roman soldiers do? They picked out of the crowd the one group – hear me clearly – that nobody would argue with. Now think about that for just a moment. They picked out a man whose appearance, speech, dress, and faith set him apart so much that even those that were a part of one or more of his "subgroups" wouldn't mind him being singled out because he maintained all groups.

Here's the picture that I want to draw for you this morning. Humanity, culture, the "they," the Romans haven an incredible history of finding some group to blame everything on. Is that not what we do? Because surely it can't be our fault. If things aren't going the way we'd like them to go, if they were not a part of the picture everything would be okay, right? If things aren't working the way we wish they would, I'd just wish that they didn't have what they have or had less than they have, or were out of the way. Isn't that

amazing? You can start running through the time frame of history and discover that at some point almost everybody at some place has been the "they" that somebody else has tried to blame everything on.

Isn't that interesting? Here's a man minding his own business with two teenagers right behind him that gets blamed for the whole mess. And what was he doing? In our language, he just had gotten up that morning and taken his family to church. Do you see the parallel? You see, this is a prophetic passage because humanity has spent an exhaustive amount of time trying to "pin or pick out" a group that everybody else will concurrently agree with that if they were out of the picture, then somehow everything would be better, would work out and would be as we desired and we hoped.

Allow me to illustrate this in somewhat a simplistic fashion but I think you'll understand. Do you find it ironic that if you're watching a show, a movie, or even if you're out and about just doing your daily living, that when people are emotionally responsive whether there's a scenario that they don't enjoy or maybe at times where they're bothered by something, according to the book of Exodus they tend to elaborate with a speech that, shall we say, is not kind to the Lord. In other words, the name of Jesus Christ is used a lot in our culture, it's just not typically done in a worshipful fashion. He is utilized, blamed, and called out for all kinds of scenarios.

Allow me to illustrate. When's the last time, and I know somebody is going to get frustrated with me so just when you send the email, sign it, that's all I ask. When's the last time you saw somebody get upset and said, "Oh, Mohammed!" They don't, do they? When's the last time somebody said, "Oh my Buddha!" They don't, do they? Do you know why? Because the world whether you know it or not has already picked out the group that's to blame and we're it.

Now it may not be over here currently today as tense as it is in other places but allow me to share the propheticness of this passage. Jesus Christ is hours away from shedding his blood on the cross. He is going to miraculously three days later raise from the dead. He's going to spend 40 days teaching the disciples and walking them through some very strategic things. And then in Acts 1, listen to this, in Acts 1 he's going to ascend and these two angelic beings show up and they said, "As you saw him depart, so he shall return in like manner." Now I know that when you go to passages such as that, it's very emphatic of Revelation 19, the clouds open up, Jesus went up, Revelation 19, the clouds open up, Jesus comes down. I get the whole Second Coming aspect of it, but can I look at it from the perspective of those early believers. The days after his crucifixion, his resurrection, and even his ascension, who was getting blamed for all the struggles in Jerusalem? The Christians were. You say, "Well, how do you know?" Because in Acts 5 a group of Jews go to Gamaliel and say, "We've got a mess on our hands. These folks are stirring it up and if we don't silence them, if we don't remove them, if we don't eliminate them..." And what did Gamaliel say? "If this is of God, you can't stop it." It wasn't much longer that a man by the name of Saul of Tarsus, most of us know him as the Apostle Paul, purposefully tried to kill Christians because they were the group that if you can get rid of them, we'll have what we need and want and desire among all of us. Do you see how that

group-think works? Then you get to Acts 17 and those Christians are called those that have turned the world upside down.

Can I give you a final prophetic thought? In Acts 1 we have 120 people plus the women, by the way, that believed different, spoke different, acted different, dressed differently, believed differently and what do we discover? That all of their culture pinpointed that Upper Room and said, "If we could just get rid of them, then we'll have what we so desire." Simon bore the cross of Jesus for 15 minutes. Later the apostles would lose their life one by one. What we know as the culture of the day began a campaign for over 200 years. There were 10 official state declarations for the eradication of those who believed in Jesus Christ. Ladies and gentlemen, Simon of Cyrene is a biblical picture of the life that most of us have been spared because that's the life that most believers live, one that the world says they believe different, they talk different, they dress different, they act different. If we could get rid of them, then everything else would work out. How dare we be foolish enough to think it happened to Simon, it happened to the apostles, it happened to the early believers and it's happening all around the globe, how dare we think it won't happen in our lives as well. Here's what I want to close with and this is what bothers me the most. Most believers today if put in Simon's place immediately rather than bearing the cross of Jesus would argue, complain and summon an attorney to get out of it. And Simon said, "Do you know what? He's worthy for 15 minutes. Surely I can do this for what he's gone through."

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. As we come to this time in our service, a time where we make decisions whether they need be public or not, maybe you're that individual that today for the very first time the word of God through the Spirit of God got ahold of your heart and maybe you realize today all that Jesus went through and all that you need to do on his behalf. The great news today is that when it comes to faith in Jesus Christ, it's not about jumping through hoops, it's not about passing tests. The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Let me encourage you today to do exactly what the Bible says. You don't have to call out necessarily verbally and out loud. You don't have to say the certain phrases that I or certain other people might say. This is your heart's cry to the one who was willing to give and to die and to bleed on behalf of your sins. Maybe today whether in person or online your conversation with the Lord would go a little something like this. "God, today I know, God, I know I have sinned. God, I know I've done things I shouldn't have done. I've been places I shouldn't have been. God, I know I've said things I shouldn't have said and I have thought things I shouldn't have thought and the Bible says that the wages or the result of my sin is death. But God, your word also says but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. So today, God, I believe, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to come on my behalf. God, he loved me so much he lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to pay the price for my sin on his cross. And God, I believe that three days later he rose from the grave making it possible and feasible for my sins to be forgiven and my soul to be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to all the issues, struggles, and problems of life but there's one thing I know, I know I've got a sin problem that only

Jesus can solve. The best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today who had that conversation with the Lord. In a moment I'm going to pray and we're going to stand and sing together. We invite you just to step out and step forward. We would love just to celebrate with you and to pray with you and to pray for you. Maybe you've already made that decision, you need to follow in believer's baptism. Maybe you've done both of those things and the Lord has said this is your place of faith, this is your spiritual home that you need to be a part of. Whatever the decision is, we're excited about and we have a whole team set aside that would love to hear your story. But in a moment I'm going to pray and we're going to stand and there will be those of you here who have "no need" to step out and step forward but I think all of us have a need that at the end of the service to step out of here not making excuses of why we cannot bear the cross but possibly even desiring the privilege of doing so.

Heavenly Father, as we come to this time of decision, thank you, thank you, God, that you were willing to do what you did on our behalf, to shed your blood, to go through the agony and the pain and the mockery and all that you have compelled us to do is to bear a portion of what you've done on our behalf. God, help us today to respond appropriately. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.