
The Servant King's Execution

Mark 15:21-47

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Today we encounter a severe mercy.¹ We will witness in the preaching of the Word something this morning that has never happened before this event and will never happen again. Watching awful brutality turn into awesome beauty will be a sight never forgotten I hope. We will watch justice and love mingle. We will see peerless perversion used by God to provide peerless love. To what event am I referring?

As the bible scholar William Lane as noted, “Death by crucifixion was one of the cruelest and most degrading forms of punishment ever conceived by human perversity, even in the eyes of the pagan world.”²

Last week, Pastor Dale brought before us “the cruelest and most degrading forms of punishment”. He described the process of bringing Jesus Christ, the servant king, to his execution. He talked about the flogging used by the Romans and how the scourge ripped the skin down to the bones. He left us last week in Mark’s narrative with Jesus bleeding profusely, unjustly tried for treason and sentenced to death. The parting words we heard were “and they led him out to crucify him” (15:20).

This morning, behold *The Servant King's Execution*. Are you ready to witness Jesus publically portrayed as crucified? (cf. Gal3:1) <pray>

Today, we will notice Jesus crucified. The details we are about to see are heinous. You may be tempted to turn your face away from the most scandalous, shocking, desecrating scene your eyes have ever met. But, I ask you to withstand this temptation. Let the Word work on your heart as you fix your eyes upon Jesus Christ.

And so, stay in your seats and keep watch, for something in our text is coming. A mounting destructive activity is billowing on the horizon. This escalating horror cannot be stopped. Nothing can thwart the awful brutality that awaits the eyes of your heart. You will witness something so devastating, so vicious, and overwhelmingly powerful that brokenness and sadness just might overtake you this morning. Don’t try to play it off. Don’t protect yourself. Trust God and continue looking. You may be surprised over how your heart responds; denouncing this barbaric scene as unjust. You may cry out, “stop, stop. Enough already”. And in this judicial sentiment you may just find yourself convicted of the very sin you hate in others—stripping you of your self-confidence. You may notice your heart muttering confessions of sin to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. You may sense an inexplicable summon to worship Jesus Christ like you never did before. You just might be stepping into new life by God who redeems us in Christ by the blood of His son and the power of his Spirit. As I preach let the destructive activities of the biblical text run their course. Don’t try to control the text. Yield to the text and allow it to control you.

¹The phrase “a severe mercy” is taken from Sheldon Vanauken’s love story *A Severe Mercy: With 18 Letters by C.S. Lewis* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1980).

²William Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 561.

The experience you are about to undergo was sought to be captured on the big screen in 2004 by Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*. His movie depicts the final twelve hours in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, on the day of his crucifixion in Jerusalem. This blockbuster attempted to play out before the watching world what happened to Jesus when he was crucified. And in part, Gibson succeeded. But the most crucial piece to his attempt to capture the historical reality of the servant king's execution was strangely missing. He left in the imagination of the audience what happened to Jesus Christ on the cross. But he failed to answer the question: why did this happen to Jesus Christ on the cross?

This morning, the bible will answer this question "why did Jesus die"? But to hear the answer, we must listen carefully to Mark 15:21-47 with the eyes of our heart fixed on the Christ. As I preach, you may be asking him, "Why are you being brutally murdered? Why do you not use your power to come down from the cross and wipe out all who are killing you? Why is God your father sending you into such a horrific moment; leaving you as you hang as a criminal on the cross? Why, Jesus, is all this happening?"

This question is answered by the narrator John Mark. In his gospel, he has led his readers up to this location – the final resolution of the intricacies of the greatest plot ever. Here we witness the climax of the gospel according to Mark. He has been guiding our expectations over the last three months to this very scenic point. And now, April 24th, 2016, the Holy Spirit has us up to the rim at his Canon in order for us to look out over the devastating and awful brutality of execution on a cross. Along the way this morning Mark our storyteller will drop clues that are designed to lead us to answer the most important question anyone can ever ask – why was Jesus Christ crucified?"

In *The Servant King's Execution* we are witnessing the wrath of God and the accomplishment of redemption. This morning, we are pressing up against the most important question anyone can ask. Why did Jesus die? What was all the suffering about? The whole message of the Bible leads us to the answer that will be revealed this morning. This answer can escort you into eternal life. The answer that is about to be exposed is your only hope of escaping the penalty and power and presence of your sin. This answer has the authority to make your conscience clear and your heart to sing. It provides forgiveness. It gives the necessary righteousness that delivers access to God's heart. This reality we are about to witness brings us in Christ to God who is our ultimate joy.

How he died and what specifically happened are gripping as noted by Mel Gibson. But if you are not gripped by the answer to why he died, you will walk out of this auditorium informed but not transformed. You just might be those who say in your hearts, "I already knew that stuff" and continue in a smug knowledge of the gospel awaiting your God-condemning, personal, conscious, ongoing, never-ending, always-increasing just wrath in hell as witnessed on Jesus today. That would be unspeakably awful. The stakes could not be higher.

Are your bibles open? Are your hearts likewise? To answer the most important question we will ever ask in our lives (i.e. why did Jesus die?) we will watch three things occur – God's wrath comes (21-32), God's wrath covers (33-36) and finally God's wrath kills (37-47). And as we watch these three things, watch for clues Mark gives that lead us to answer the question, "why did Jesus die"?

God's wrath comes

vv. 21-32

To answer the most important question in life – why did Jesus die? – first take a listen to v.21-32 and the chilling sense of God's wrath coming.

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. And they brought him 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 they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. 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, save yourself, and come down from the cross!” 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.

(Mark 15:21-32 ESV)

Delivered over

15:1,15

To understand why Jesus died we must see how Jesus got here. Jesus in 10:33 said, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man **will be delivered over**³ to the chief priests and the scribes and they will condemn him to death”. Jesus got to this condemned position by way of “being delivered over” as noticed in 15:1 and 15:15. In verse one, being delivered over refers to the Jews who delivered him over to the Gentiles to be condemned. The Jews understood this handing over as a way of putting the victim into the judgment of God. For example, in Eze. 39:23 God said, “Israel went into captivity for their iniquity because they dealt so treacherously with me that I hid my face from them and gave them into the hand of their adversaries and they all fell by the sword”. In verse 15 being delivered over references the Gentiles. Gentiles delivering people over to the executioner through crucifixion is another way of highlighting justice through punishment.

So, right from the start we are looking at God’s wrath coming against wickedness in order to punish the wicked. It’s like an exile, a banishment to death due to the sin of rebellion.

Carrying the cross

v.21-23

In v21-23 we see more evidence of God’s wrath. Jesus was judged guilty of high treason and sentenced to death. With two other condemned criminals, Jesus was ordered to walk in front of the public on the street that leads him to his place of execution. He’s losing blood. He’s losing strength. He is bearing the weight of punishment. On his shoulders is the raw, splintered piece of wood on which he eventually will be brutally tortured to death. And as he stumbled carrying his cross to Golgotha, he is on the way to the place known as The Skull—an awful execution site.

So brutally whipped by scourges that he didn’t even look like a man. “His appearance was so marred beyond human semblance” (Isa.52:14) that blood, bones and perhaps even vital organs were exposed to the onlookers.

³For an excellent treatment of the biblical theology of the gospel of Mark see Peter Bolt, *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark’s Gospel* New Studies In Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004). His work assisted in developing this message. Regarding the word [παραδίδομι] Mark used frequently in his gospel to refer to “handing over to judgment (either human or divine) see Mark 1:14; 3:19; 9:31; 10:33; 13:9,11,12; 14:10,11,18,21,41,42,44; 15:1,10,15. For a sample of this word used in the LXX see Isa.53:6,12.

Here before our eyes is the most sacred being treated as the most profane. Yet he gave himself into their treatment. Prophecy tells us that he “gave his back to those who flogged him. He gave his cheeks to those who pull out the beard. He gave his face to those who show disgrace. He presented his face to those who spit in his face.” (Isa.50:6). The soldiers grabbed a man named Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross-piece to Golgotha. Simon’s boys were standing there watching. This heinous scene was to be viewed by men and women; boys and girls.

Crucified

v24-32

We see how Jesus was delivered over and how he carried the cross. As our eyes moved down the passage to verses 24-32, we read of Jesus crucified. Clues over why Jesus died are plentiful in these verses.

Divided garments, numbered with transgressors & mockery

For example, in v24 we hear of the divided garments. This echoes Psalm 22:18 and a reference to a criminal undergoing judgment. The observation of Jesus crucified with transgressors in v27 clearly alludes to Isaiah 53:12 and the suffering servant on behalf of God’s chosen people. Or even the mockery throughout this whole scene (v.29-32, 35-36) gives us a clue to why Jesus died. Mockery reflects OT passages like Psalm 22:7 or Jer. 18:16 and how God’s wrath descends upon sin.

We are starting to see something of why Jesus died. We are picking up clues telling us that Jesus’ death was not random. Jesus’ death was prophesied many years prior to its occurring. There is a Master Mind behind all these details and all this destruction.⁴ That this destruction has something to do with sin and judgment is patently obvious. But why Jesus? Why is he undergoing such a grotesque and unwarranted death?

On a cross

We see his death was planned. We see it was carried out to the details as prophecy foretold. We see this brutal execution was a penalty for wickedness. But now, the following observation will give us insight further into Jesus’ death. Verses 30,32 tell us that he died “on a cross”.

The Jews knew well their law. Deuteronomy 21:22f says, “If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man [on a tree] is cursed by God.” The first readers of Mark’s gospel would have had a NT understanding of Jesus on a tree as Galatians 3:13 gives: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”

God’s wrath covers

vv.33-36

To answer the most important question in life, Mark gives us clues. We’ve seen that Jesus was the target of God’s wrath. Now in v33-36 we see God’s wrath covering. Listen for more clues that Mark gives his reader helping us with our guiding question.

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. 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?” And some of the bystanders hearing it said,

⁴Acts 4:27-28

“Behold, he is calling Elijah.” 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.”

(Mark 15:33-36 ESV)

Utter darkness (33)

We pick up the story with Jesus now on the cross for three hours. Writhing under the weight of God’s wrath, gasping for breath as he stays on the cross as a curse for our sins. And now we see God’s wrath covering his son in darkness. How are we to understand this information? What contribution does this three hour darkness make to the story of Jesus crucified? This historical event of darkness covering the land is reminiscent of an OT scene.

In Exodus 10, we come to the ninth of ten plagues God poured out on idolatrous Egypt. Pharaoh held God’s people in slavery mistreating them badly. In this passage we witness the LORD coming to deliver his people from the bondage to slavery and redeem his people for himself; to set the captives free and lead them to himself in a land of peace and plenty.

Why did Jesus die? We now are receiving a glimpse of the answer. Jesus is covered with God’s wrath as if he were the criminal himself. But he wasn’t the criminal. We are. He took our place so that he would pay the price for our sin. Once sin was paid in full, we are set free from the tyranny of sin and Satan and suffering. Christ was plagued with God’s wrath. His execution was our liberty. He hung on the cross in God’s furious darkness to absorb his wrath in order to bring us to God.

Loud cry (34)

Now we are ready for verse 34 and the loud cry. Jesus’ imminent death is before us. Soon he will utter his last cry and then die. What is this loud cry all about? Is Jesus afraid that God the Father has failed to rescue him in his mission to rescue his people? Will Jesus’ death be the end of Jesus? Are we witnessing the writhing agony of defeat? “My God, my God why have you forsaken me”?

The answer to these types of questions are a resounding no! Jesus is quoting the OT. Ps.22:1 starts “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me”. Go back and read this Psalm from start to finish. You will sense the theme that Jesus is fulfilling on the cross. The flow of ps.22 starts in despair, moves through trust and rescue and ends in praise. This very theme is the theme of the most significant story in life. It is the story of the gospel. People who believe Mark 8:31 are those who know that the writhing agony of defeat is the very pathway to the rising praise of victory. Jesus knows he is not ultimately abandoned to death. He knows he is coming out of the grave. He knows his death defeats Satan and purchases his people for his praise and their eternal pleasure. This awful brutality we’ve been watching is actually his awesome beauty he is performing. This is how God’s sinful people are saved from wrath and delivered into the arms of their loving heavenly father.

Those who know not merely stories from the bible but the story of the bible hear something in this quoted psalm. They know that the divine playwright, the Holy Spirit who wrote the bible through inspired men authored not a tragedy but a victory.⁵

God's wrath kills

vv.37-47

O my. It's a mystery to see "breathtakingly extravagant"⁶ good news of great joy in the midst of blood, horror and now death. But it is precisely here that we encounter beauty. "The greatest moment of displayed glory was in the shame of the cross."⁷ God's wrath descends on God-belittling sin and kills God's beloved son. Are you there yet? Is your heart answering the most significant question you will ever utter - "why did Jesus die"? God did this not because Jesus owed the price of sin but because Jesus paid the price for our sin.

In our last segment of this scene we encounter God's wrath killing his son. It is finished. God sentenced sin to death and executed it "as he made him who knew no sin to become sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in him".

There is one more observation in this scene that we must come to terms with. This observation will assist you not only in answering the question for today but to answer it personally. Here in this scene we notice a group of people responding to Jesus different from the mockers. Listen up for them as I read for us the last part of this brutal yet beautiful scene. Picking up in our story in v.37 we hear:

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!" 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. 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. And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, 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. Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. 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. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

⁵For a fascinating read on this perspective see Matthew Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 127-29.

⁶D. A. Carson, *John*, 569.

⁷*Ibid.*, 482.

Died (37)

Verse 37 shows that he actually died. Other parts of the bible put it this way, “Jesus died for our sins”; “He was crushed for our iniquities”; “Christ died once for all – the righteous for the unrighteous – to bring us to God”.⁸

Torn veil (38)

And in verse 38 the temple veil separating the sanctuary from the courtyard⁹ was torn from top to bottom. With Jesus crushing sin and Satan by being crushed under the wrath of God for our sins, the temple is no longer needed. Christ crucified voids the Jewish temple. He fulfilled what he said and set out to do: “I will destroy this temple” (14:58; 15:29). By killing his son, God from top to bottom tore the veil ruining the temple. God makes now the statement: “the place of true worship is no longer found in an earthly place – the location is a person; the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the temple. His people in Christ are the temple. This reality of the power of the cross cancels out the old Jewish temple and brings in the new way of the Spirit. Jesus is the place and the person of Christian worship.

Loving eyewitnesses (39-47)

We are now past the climax in the story. Jesus died. It is finished. These significant clues pointing to why he died have been collected and considered. These particular clues cause us to conclude that Christ’s death was for sin but not his own. Rather, he was the substitute for God’s people. Christ went into the very wrath of God to pay the price for our sin. Paid in full is the results of crucifixion

As we wrap up this message, notice who was noticing Jesus of Nazareth; hanging dead on a cross under the fury of the wrath of God. They were 1) a centurion, 2) many women and 3) a Pharisee This group represents all types of people: male, female, Jew, Gentile, religious, non-religious, professional, common, strong, weak, rich, poor . . .

In verses 39-47 notice with me 3 basic characteristics of someone whose eyes see the true identity and activity of Jesus Christ.

1. Centurion –He looks at how Jesus died and confesses that Jesus was the Son of God (a term used in the Roman Empire only for the Caesars. The centurion, given eyes to see Jesus’ identity, confesses that Jesus was the rival and true ruler of the people. The centurion was given sight to see and understand the reality of Christ’s identity. The first characteristic of one whose heart recognizes and relishes Jesus can be summarized in one word: CONFESSING
2. Many women –The second group that contrasts the group of mockers are the women in v40-41, 47. These women are brought into Mark’s story to underscore the second characteristic of one who recognizes Jesus as the king who saves. They witnessed the dying and death of Jesus.

⁸1 Corinthians 15:3; Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 3:18

⁹It is not altogether clear to which curtain Mark is referring. There were two veils. There was an inner veil (separating the Holy of Holies from the Holy place. This sacred space was given to the high priest once a year to enter for the people. And there was the outer veil separating the sanctuary from the courtyard. It seems plausible that Mark refers to the outer one simply because it would have been witnessed by the public. The torn veil was a public sign similar to the darkness that covered the land.

Next week we will see something else they witnessed. Undoubtedly some if not many in this group would have been alive when people were reading and hearing the gospel according to Mark for the first time (AD 65). They could have been sought out by inquirers as to the historicity and authenticity of this story. They were called upon to be witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ – life, death and resurrection of the son of God. The second characteristic that identifies one who follows Jesus Christ in one word is: WITNESSING

3. A Pharisee –The third person highlighted in this passage whose eyes appear to be open to Christ’s true identity is a Pharisee. His name is Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Council who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God. This man knew the law (Deut.21) that required a body hung on a tree under the sentence of death was to be taken down before sunset. Joseph wanted to uphold this law. But he also wanted to uphold respect and decency for Jesus in carrying out this rite. But to do this would require him to break ranks of the Sanhedrin, to be exposed in front of his peers and others, to be confronted by the powerful Pilate. All of this requires courage. The third characteristic to be highlighted of one who looks upon Jesus favorably is COURAGEOUS.

Here are people who looked upon Jesus with conviction and affection. They are people who confess him to be the son of God, who witness of his sovereign, good and wise ways, who actually worship him and live this newness out courageously. This is the type of people who flee the wrath of God by fleeing to Jesus. Are you one of these?

How heinous is sin? Look to the cross for your answer.

How serious is sin? Look to the cross for your answer.

How powerful is the cross over the curse? Look to the cross for your answer.

How merciful is the king over my rebellion? Look to the cross for your answer.

How deep is the father’s love for us? Look to the cross for your answer.

Trust Christ. Rest in his accomplished work on the Cross. Hope in him for the full payment for your sin. Put your faith in him as the only one who diverts God’s wrath from you and delivers God’s love to you. Do this today. Do this now. Worship the suffering and now reigning king of the universe – Jesus Christ our Lord.