

Sermon for Sunday, March 25, 2012
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The Sacrifice
Mark 15:15-34

Mark 15:16 The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. 17 They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. 18 And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" 19 Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. 20 And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. 21 A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. 22 They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). 23 Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. 24 And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. 25 It was the third hour when they crucified him. 26 The written notice of the charge against him read:.... 27 They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left. 29 Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30 come down from the cross and save yourself!"

31 In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! 32 Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him. 33 At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. 34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

1. The crucifixion

The crucifixion of Jesus is the best attested, most divisive, and misunderstood event in ancient history. We know more about the death of Jesus, from early sources, than about any other ancient event. Josephus, 1st century Jewish historian said, "Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us... condemned [Jesus] to the cross."

- The Roman historian Tacitus says, "Christ, during the reign of Tiberius, had been executed by the procurator Pontius Pilate.
- The Stoic philosopher Mara bar Serapion says that misfortune overtakes those who persecute wise men, such as Socrates, Pythagoras and Jesus: "What did it avail the Jews to kill their wise king, since their kingdom was taken away from them from that time on. Socrates is not dead, thanks to Plato. Nor is the wise king [Jesus] because of the new law which he has given."
- Jewish sources, too report the crucifixion. One rabbi says, "he was hanged on the eve of the Passover" for leading the people astray.

The gospel accounts of Jesus' death offer the most facts and the best interpretation. We know the accounts are true because the crucifixion is not a story Christians would fabricate. Who would choose to start a new movement by declaring that its founder was executed for sedition and blasphemy?

Crucifixion was a painful way to die. The Bible does not describe the terrible physical pain from dislocated limbs, the struggle to breathe until suffocation, heart failure or blood loss took the victim.

Crucifixion was also shameful way to die. Victims were executed in public before a blood-thirsty mob. It was reserved for criminals, slaves and rebels and used to terrorize the masses. Finally, it was an accursed way to die. Moses says, "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut 21:23). Jesus suffered all this on our account. It is harrowing even to study it. Yet we must, for it is integral to God's plan of deliverance. So let us follow Mark, not dwelling on physical events, but on the words that lead us to the meaning of the cross.

But what does it mean? Is the crucifixion simply another tragic death? Many reformers and teachers were slain for their ideas of the centuries. Is this another case of tragic intolerance, or is there something more? It is a tragedy – and more.

To move from the facts to the reasons for Jesus' death, we must hold two truths in dynamic tension. First, the men who placed Jesus on the cross were motivated by hatred, envy and fear. Yet the crucifixion unfolded as God planned. The words "hand over" or "betray" (mentioned forty times in passion narratives; Greek *paradidomi*) makes the point.

Judas handed Jesus over to the priests out of greed and took money for it. The priests handed Jesus over to Pilate out of envy and self-righteousness. Pilate handed Jesus over to the soldiers out of cowardice and they killed him. Yet God handed him over for us all (Rom 4:23, 8:32). So the motive was not finally: Judas for money, Pilate for fear, or Jews for envy, but the Father for love.¹

2. The soldiers mock Jesus, king of the Jews (15:15-20)

Just before the crucifixion, Pilate's soldiers decided to have some fun at Jesus' expense. So then "the whole company of soldiers gathered around" Jesus (15:16). Jesus was condemned, officially, for claiming to be the king of Israel. The rowdy soldiers took the charge of kingship and mocked it.

First, they took Jesus into the Praetorium, the barracks for soldiers guarding Jerusalem. They engaged in horseplay, dressing Jesus as a king. They took off his old clothes "and put a purple robe on him," as purple was the color of royalty. Next, they put a crown or garland of thorns on his head to mock a crown (15:17). That surely drew blood.

Next "they began to call out to him 'Hail, king of the Jews!'" (15:18). Becoming more brutal, "they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him." Next they "they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him" (15:19-20).

The goal was to degrade Jesus, but they surely degraded themselves far more. Whenever we attack someone, we hurt ourselves, not just the target of our wrath.

3. The soldiers crucify Jesus the king of the Jews (15:21-28)

A condemned criminal ordinarily carried the horizontal beam for his own cross to the site of the execution. But Jesus had suffered fierce beatings, so he was too weak to carry the beam far. The soldiers

¹ Stott, Cross, 61

pressed a passing man into service. "A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross" (15:21).

Roman soldiers had the power to compel anyone to help them if they wished. Jesus was faltering, so they ordered Simon to carry the cross-beam for him. Mark rarely names minor characters, but here we learn Simon's name, home town and the names of his sons. Reason: Alexander and Rufus were well-known to Mark's readers. Here we have a beautiful touch. Simon met Jesus by accident, he told his sons, who became Christians. Through this random event, God brought these men to faith and leadership. The same thing can happen today. It doesn't matter how we hear about Jesus. God uses accidents. But we must listen and respond.

Well, they arrived at Golgotha, and "offered [Jesus] wine to drink, mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it (15:23). Myrrh is a narcotic. Tradition says that godly women gave it to condemned criminals to ease their pain, citing Proverbs 31:6-7 English Standard Version (ESV): "Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress." But Jesus refused. He bore the cross with full consciousness.

Mark says almost nothing about the crucifixion itself, just three words Greek: "they crucified him" (15:24). People knew what crucifixion meant and it was so terrible, people judged it unfit for public discussion. Beyond that, the emphasis lies on the witnesses and their responses to the event.

The soldiers are the first witnesses. Before the crucifixion they mocked, spat, and struck him. At 9 a.m., they crucified him, then watch him as they waited for his death. On the cross itself, they write the charge against him: "THE KING OF THE JEWS." This advertised the cost of rebelling against Rome. Crucifixion was a tool of intimidation, warning people to stay in line. And they passed time gambling. Clothing was expensive, so they cast stones like dice for his clothes (15:23-25).

Yet ironically, the soldiers tell the truth, despite themselves. They mean to humiliate Jesus, but they told the truth: Jesus is king; he reigns from the cross! A king must defend his people and deliver them from harm. On the cross, Jesus delivers us from the greatest harm, the guilt and power of sin. He defeats our greatest enemies, Satan and death. But the soldiers are no more perceptive than cows at sunset. The crucifixion is just another day's work.

To this day, many people are like the soldiers. They see the crucifixion and yet they do not see. It happened, but they don't care. Or, just as the soldiers saw the chance to gain valuable clothing, some see a trivial chance for gain.

4. A crowd mocks Jesus, king of the Jews (15:29-32)

The soldiers were indifferent, but most witnesses mocked Jesus as they passed by. There is a logic to their position. If Jesus were the Messiah, he would hardly be on a cross between two criminals (15:38). No Messiah, no true king, could die this way! As they see it, Jesus' crucifixion proves he is an imposter. Therefore, "Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!'" (15:29-30).

How tragic to see the crowds do this. A year earlier, the crowds seemed to be on the brink of faith in Jesus. They followed him and praised him. They wondered who he was and called him David's Son (Matt 21:10-16). But they never called him Lord. Many did trust in Jesus, especially in Galilee. But this crowd

from Jerusalem did not. The majority hesitated. So they were susceptible to the priests, who persuaded them to reject Jesus.

In a letter, Paul says, "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2). If the Lord speaks to anyone at any time, it's perilous to put off a reply. If we wait and wait, thinking well of Jesus but refusing to commit to him, we may slowly turn against him.

The taunts of the crowd make Jesus face, one last time, the temptation to use his powers to escape the cross. The leaders of Israel, who watch closely, press the point: "The chief priests, the teachers of the law mocked him.... 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe'" (15:31-32). Even the two who were crucified on his right and left "heaped insults on him" (15:27, 32).

We hear ironic truths. In the past, Jesus did save others. It's also true, in a way, that he can't save himself. He could come down from the cross, because he is the Son of God. He could come down to demonstrate his power, just long enough to knock some sense into those scoffers. If we were in Jesus' place, we would find the temptation irresistible. Or Jesus could have come down for good. But if he did, he would not save our fallen race. Because he chose to fulfill his mission and save us, he could not save himself - not that day. For our sake, he let them mock, let them think they knew it all.

Hear this lesson. Many of us have faced someone who makes an accusation with a know-it-all swagger. They think you can't answer. Actually, you can, but giving it would cause great harm. There is a secret to keep, an innocent party to protect. Jesus shows us to take the wound and let the accuser think they know it all, not because you can't answer, but because it would cause more harm. It's hard to control the urge to defend ourselves. Jesus shows us how and that it's right to do it.

Yet Jesus resisted a terrible temptation. The mockery was a fist in God's face. His honor was at stake and Jesus had an answer. Yet he remained silent. He refused to trade insult for insult: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet 2:23). So Jesus refused to come down from the cross! He chose to save others, so he did not save himself. Jesus loved us too much to defend himself or vindicate himself. When he spoke, he called out to God.

Learn the lessons. First, when accused, we are not obligated to defend ourselves. We can wait for God to vindicate us, even as Jesus did. Second, contrast Christianity with other ways of life. Muslims believe Muhammad must be honored; many are willing to kill those who insult their prophet. Some Muslims believe Jesus was a prophet and Jesus was not mocked or crucified. Allah saved him from the shame.

But the bearing of shame is essential to Jesus' work. On the cross, Jesus bore our sin and all its consequences, including the guilt and shame of sin. If Jesus had not been insulted and slain, there would be no salvation.

David foretold this: "All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads" (Psa 22:7). Isaiah predicted it: "He was despised and rejected by men... and we esteemed him not" (Isa 53:3). Jesus endured all this with perfect patience. This was his saving work: he suffered all the results of sin for us.

Most people are enraged by mockery. But there is another view. Solomon says a "good name" is a good thing - "more desirable than great riches" (Prov 22:1, Eccl 7:1, Jer 17:18). The Bible also says that no one who hopes or trusts in God will be put to shame" (Psa 25:3, Rom 10:11). Clearly, honor is good.

Yet we deserve some dishonor, even shame. We may feel shame if we dress incorrectly for a party. We may feel shame if we have bad hair or the wrong car. We may be ashamed if we have less money or if we lack some skill - we can't operate a computer or dishwasher.

But are we ashamed of the right things? We know social failings cause shame – we hate to be out of step with social norms. But I wonder if we feel enough shame over our sins, our moral and spiritual failings.

We know Jesus bears our sin. Mark reminds us that he also endured shame on our behalf and removed the shame that properly falls on many sins. Even if we get caught and our sin becomes public, our shame is gone because Jesus bore our sins and our shame on the cross.

More, when we identify with him, his glory becomes ours. Jesus is our champion. If we cheer for an athletic team and they succeed, we feel that we won - our city or state basks in their glory. Baseball starts in a few days and we recall the Cardinals' glory. This week "March madness" is in its late stages. I cheer for Missouri's Tigers and UNC Tar Heels (I finished H.S. there). But look at the rosters and see that the identification is weak. One Cardinal is from St. Louis. Just three "Mizzou" players were from Missouri and only a few Tar Heels from North Carolina. We don't really know these men, nor do they know us.

Our identification with Jesus is far stronger. We can know him. He does know us. He invites us to his team, his roster, the winning team. When he defeats sin, the glory is really ours.

5 Jesus cries out from the cross (15:33-36)

After several hours on the cross, the end was near. Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34). It's a startling cry. Until now, Jesus had called God "Father" or "My Father." Now he says, "My God, My God." Till now, Jesus enjoyed unbroken fellowship with the Father. But now he declares himself forsaken. What has changed? Why does Jesus say this?

First, this is a sincere cry. Some explain it away. They say pain overwhelmed Jesus so that he was temporarily confused. Or he was just quoting Scripture (Psa. 22). But the question, "Why have you forsaken me?" is valid. Jesus knew that he was forsaken by the Father. At that moment he didn't fully apprehend why. He groped in darkness, for a moment and asked, "Why?" The crowds were confused! (15:35-36).

But we know: He endured the uncertainty, feels the separation from God that has tested so many of the faithful. But he doesn't simply feel it. Jesus feels forsaken because he is forsaken. The Father turned from him due in the great exchange. He bore our sin and gave us his righteousness. When he bore our sin, he suffered sin's punishment. The essence of that punishment, the essence of hell, is separation from God. Jesus felt separated from God because he was separated. He who knew no sin became a sin-offering for us. He bore the curse for us (2 Cor 5:21, Gal 3:13). Jesus cries, "My God, I am forsaken" that no one now should use those words of desolation.

The anguish of separation from God is all the more acute for Jesus, since he enjoyed perfect fellowship with the Father until that hour. On the cross, as he bore our sins, Jesus "descended into hell," and experienced separation from God.

So it's a sincere cry. But second, it's a mysterious cry. How could the triune God suffer separation from himself? This is close to the question "How could Jesus, the God-man die?" There are mysteries in the life of God that we cannot fathom. But even if we cannot fathom it, we can say Jesus' words are true. The Father separated himself from the Son. However mysterious this is, we know this:

Jesus was forsaken by the Father, so that we, by faith, would never be forsaken. This is the hope of the gospel. God will never leave us, never forsake us.

Third, it's an obedient cry. Jesus wasn't emoting, he was fulfilling his goal. He bore sin and its consequences, including separation from God. Richard Sibbes, the English Puritan, said Jesus was never more obedient, never pleased the Father more, than when he uttered these words on the cross.

Jesus rightly said "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" so that we would never rightly say, "My God my God, why have you forsaken me?" We may feel forsaken at times, but we are not, if we trust in Jesus. He will never leave us, will never forsake us.

Let that be your comfort when you lie sick in bed. When a good friend lets you down. When you cannot see the future and feel anxious. When you feel lonely for no reason. Know then that God will never forsake you. Jesus experienced all the consequences of sin, including separation from God, for you on the cross.

When the hour is dark, we must also remember that Jesus laid aside the prerogatives of deity and experienced the sorrows of mankind.

- God is omniscient, yet Jesus experienced ignorance, asking "Why?"
- God is omnipotent. Yet Jesus fell under the burden of the cross.
- God is omnipresent, but Jesus was fixed to a cross and did not leave it.
- God is unchanging, yet Jesus grieved and wept. So he understands our sorrow, and empathizes with us.

6. The meaning of the crucifixion

Mark says, "With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last" (15:37). Consider the scene in Jerusalem just after Jesus' death. The mockers and blasphemers harbor grim satisfaction. The chief priests and elders have slain their foe. Nearby, as insensitive as flies in an art gallery, the soldiers blithely gather the tools of their trade.

Jesus' foes wanted to get rid of him and the soldiers wanted to ignore him. But Jesus is the transcendental interferer. We resent his interruptions into our privacy, his demand for our homage, his expectation of our obedience. He will not leave us alone or let us mind our own business. He disturbs the peace and insists that we attend to him.

So Christians proclaim the cross: absurd to a Greek, sinister to a Roman, a curse to a Jew. Yet Jesus' death and resurrection is the church's core proclamation. It is the way to peace with God. It is the Christian way of life. It inspires us to action.

During the Revolutionary War, a young soldier entered a battle near Princeton. As he advanced to the battle, he found himself near General George Washington. He wrote: "I shall never forget what I felt when I saw him brave all the dangers of the field, his important life hanging... by a single hair with a thousand deaths flying around him. Believe me, I thought not of myself."²

Paul tells us something better. The life of Christ, he says, teaches us not to live for ourselves: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:3-5). Let him be our example, and (more) our Lord, the one who endured the cross and its shame so that it would not fall to us to bear it.

So then, the facts of the crucifixion are clear, but how shall we respond? Some still mock – like the soldiers and priests. Some are indifferent. It's one more sad fact in a world full of them.

Some are like Simon – those who saw, believed, and identified with Jesus. He is our Lord. We are on his team, he bore our sin and we share in his glory.

Now he is our king. Or – coach, boss, CEO, president, governor, hero, master, substitute. He is our resurrection and our life. Our king – not just for an hour, but always. For Jesus spent only a few hours on the cross, and yet it was the center of history. So may it be the center of our history.

² McCollough, 1776. p. 289