



Pastor Kyle Mercer
Jesus & Death

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Series: Unexpected
Mark 15

BIG IDEA – THE DEATH OF JESUS WAS PAINFUL & PURPOSEFUL

We've always said we don't just have a church vision. I mean, we have a church vision. Yeah, we want to have Community Groups, *this* type of preaching, *that* type of kids' ministry, but we never have said we primarily want to have a church vision; we've said we want to have a city vision. We came to Winston-Salem because we love the city of Winston, we love the people of Winston, and we came here to serve, to bless, to pray for, and to reach our city.

Our city is in a unique season and moment. There's a renewal. There's a revitalization of our city. Here's what we knew when we were going to come to Winston: if we were going to saturate the city with the gospel, we were going to have to partner with all expressions of the body of Christ. Yes, that means other churches. Of course, we collaborate and cooperate with other churches but also other great gospel-centered nonprofits like Healing Ministries.

Now, when you see that video... I mean, it's like, Greg Jones... That's how I feel. I'm like, "I salute you. You went back into the darkest areas to bring light." I love what he calls his ministry is *Healing Ministries*, because he has the theology (I hope you do as well) of healing. There's brokenness so people need healing. There's spiritual slavery, so people need freedom. There's lack of hope, and people need hope. Greg is bringing that. You're watching, and you're like, "Basketball with gang members?"

Here's a question you may ask: "How does he get all of those people in East Winston to that basketball game or where he's teaching the gospel or where they're worshipping together?" Well, guess what. Most people don't have transportation there. He has an old van that doesn't work very well and doesn't have enough seats that he tries to go around and pick everyone up with.

We just decided, as a church staff, that's not okay. So, we're going to buy him a 15-passenger van. Yes! Listen. Jesus needed a boat; Greg needs a van. Jesus slept in that boat. He ministered in that boat. He taught from that boat. He fished in that boat. We just think this is going to be an unbelievable resource.

Now, this is coming out of our Hold the Rope initiative. If you're new with us, we do this every year. It's our way to help local, national, and global ministries go further faster. We're asking for 100 percent participation. When you give to the Hold the Rope initiative, you're helping to buy Greg and Healing Ministries a 15-passenger van so he can do more effective and efficient ministry.

Let me also remind you that this is why we are headed downtown with our new location. This is why we're making what we call a *geographical and generational move*. God opened it up. It's an amazing story I've told you before...13 acres in downtown. It's hard to explain. It's right where it's under-resourced and up-and-coming.

It's where the urban poor and the urban trendy are. It's where people are moving to. It's where the medical school is right down the street. It's also where apartments are going in. It's also where nonprofits have put their headquarters, because there are needy areas around there, to meet felt and forever needs. So, we're really excited.

I want to show you a couple of pictures updating on our property. Our hope in 2023, which is just next month, is to show you more pictures. So, that's the foundation. The foundation of the building is being laid. The foundation of the church is Christ. The foundation of that building is cement. Do you see that? That's what's happening.

Then we have the main structure walls going up. We have another picture of that. There we go. Let me try to show this to you. Here's where our worship center is going to be. This is going to be a place of worship and a place of witness for decades to come. We are moving as fast and as responsibly as we can. Our hope in 2023 is to be able to give you more of a timeline.

What they've told us is once we fully get above ground, they'll have a better idea of giving us a real timeline. When they're below ground and they're finding things like terra cotta sewers, and all of these other kinds of things, it's slowing things down a little bit, but our hope in 2023 is to be giving you monthly updates on where we're heading. Let's pray. Let's pray for our city, particularly for Greg Jones, and for this building.

Lord, we thank you for Greg. I just thank you that he has such a clear and compelling calling. I pray you'd give each of us that. For some of us, that might be within our career. For some of us, that might be within our family. For some of us, that might be

within education or our neighborhood. Would you just give us a compelling vision that, like Greg, causes us to move toward people? I thank you that he's doing holistic ministry.

What we are, as humans, is we are a soul in a body in a community, and we need to care for the soul, the body, and the community. I thank you for the comprehensive care of Healing Ministries. We are excited to celebrate and support them in this new year. Lord, we pray for this building. This building is a home and a hub for ministry. It's a place of witness and worship. It's a means to a greater end of deeper discipleship and wider mission. Would you help us to do that? In Christ's name, amen.

This last week, I got a phone call from a good friend of mine. He was sharing that his dad died. His dad was just about to be 70 years old, and it was not necessarily a big surprise. They had seen his health declining for some time, but it was still a shock. I was able to go, and just a few days ago, I was at a funeral in Asheville. I don't know how often you go to funerals.

My guess is the older you get the more funerals you go to. When you're very young, Great-Grandma's funeral is the only one you can remember. Then maybe, as you get a little older, you remember Grandma and Grandpa's funeral, and then one day you wake up (this is a sad day, and this has happened to maybe many of you already), and it's like, "Oh, this was Dad's funeral." Then you get a little bit older, and you realize, "This is my sister's funeral. This is my friend's funeral."

Whenever you go to a funeral, they're all different, but they're all kind of the same. I won't spend all the time on all of the ways they're different. The ways they're the same are there's always... As soon as you walk in, there's a sense of sadness over the whole room. People are crying. People are hugging. There's a sense of shock, even if you know it's happening, because you never quite know what it's going to be like when that person is gone.

By the way, the biblical definition of death is separation, because what happens at death? Your soul is separated from your body, and the person who dies is separated from everybody who's still here. You feel that separation. Then the third thing you see at a lot of funerals is just a sense of silence. No one knows what to say. I'm talking a good, gospel-centered, Jesus-loving, Bible-saturated funeral. There's still a sense...

Maybe the guy who gets up and does the eulogy knows a little bit what to say, but most people don't know what to say. Well, here's what we're going to look at. If you'll turn to Mark 15, today, Jesus has to face his own funeral. Jesus has to face his own death. In fact, we're going to see in chapter 15... We're going to have to move pretty quickly. It's a big text. We're going to see Jesus face death and dying. Those aren't necessarily the same things.

Death happens at the end of life, but dying...well, that's a whole other thing. Dying in an excruciating and humiliating way is another thing. They say the two biggest fears of humanity are death and being publicly shamed. Now, you may have heard the two biggest fears are death and public speaking, but if you ever talk to somebody who's really afraid of public speaking... They have nightmares about speaking in their underwear. You're like, "What's that about?"

This is something I actually know a little bit about. When you speak publicly, everything about you is on display, and it's a little bit vulnerable. It's like, "This is how good-looking I am. This is how funny I am or am not. This is how smart I am or am not. I know how to dress or I don't know how to dress." It's all on display, and it's overwhelming. So, people's greatest fear is death. Their second greatest fear is to be in front of everyone and embarrass themselves or be put to shame.

What we see with Jesus today is he's going to die while being publicly shamed. Here's where we're going. Death kind of hangs over this whole chapter. It's going to start with Pilate condemning him to death. (We'll talk about Pilate.) It's going to be about the crowds cheering him on to death. "Crucify him! Crucify him!" It's going to be about the soldiers beating him basically to death, and then it's going to be about the people who believe in him because of his death. That's where we're headed.

Here's what I want us to remember, if you kind of miss everything else. We're supposed to see two things in this chapter. The death of Christ was painful, and it was purposeful. You don't want something that's painful that's not also purposeful. It was certainly painful. In fact, what's interesting (I'll show you this) is there's a lot less about the physical pain and a lot more about the emotional, mental, psychological, and spiritual pain.

I mean, they'll just write, "They scourged him." No adjectives. No explanation. "They crucified him." They will spend a lot of time on how they humiliated him, on how they bullied him, on how they mocked him. So, we're going to look at how his death was painful, but it was purposeful. Here's what we mean. Jesus didn't just die as a martyr for a cause. That might be how the average modern person views Jesus.

Jesus didn't just die as an example for us to follow on how to suffer well. That's more how the mainline liberal churches would look at this. Jesus died as a substitute and sacrifice to satisfy the wrath of God. That's the heart of Christianity. In fact, Karl Barth, who I don't normally quote... He was a Swiss theologian, a genius. He had good and bad things that he said.

He believed the most important Greek word in the entire New Testament was *huper*. You go, "What does *huper* mean?" *Huper* means instead of or on behalf of or, as we put on our shirts in baptism, in place of. So, when you read this, you need to realize

that Jesus is being your substitute, your sacrifice. He's doing this instead of you having to do it and in place of you and on behalf of you.

01 JESUS BEFORE PILATE & THE CROWD (ON DEATH ROW)

With that said, let's turn to Mark 15, and we're going to look at verse 1 at his interaction with Pilate. ***"And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate."***

What's happening is... It's a long story. You have to put Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John together to get all this. He's moving from a Jewish court to a Roman court. He actually had three Jewish trials if you put it all together. He's now going to have three Roman trials. Under the Jewish trial, the big accusation was blasphemy. They tried a bunch of other things, but blasphemy was the only thing that stuck.

Then they move him to a Roman trial. Did the Romans care about blasphemy? No, they didn't care at all. So, we're moving from a Jewish trial to a political trial, and the main accusation is going to be political revolt. "He's saying he's the king of the Jews." Now, here's what's interesting. I just want to point this out every time it comes up. The people who hated Jesus the most and handed him over were the chief priests.

Why did they do that? Because Jesus confronted the religious spirit of the day, and the religious spirit of the day is the same religious spirit of *our* day. It's the spirit that puts yourself at the center of your religion. Jesus said, "You're not to be at the center; I'm to be at the center." That's what drove them crazy. So, they hand him over.

By the way, this is interesting also and kind of a sobering warning. The end of the Gospels and the end of Acts end the same way: a lot of court cases. Do you ever wonder, "Why do Christians seem to care about who's a Supreme Court justice?" Because we have 2,000 years of history of understanding how important religious liberty is, and most times, when people stand before courts all over the world for what they believe in, it does not go well for them.

So, he's handed over to Pilate. Now who's Pilate? Pilate is the fifth governor of Judea. Here's what you need to know about him: not a Jew, hated the Jews. We think, "Oh, wow. Amazing. Pontius Pilate. He gets to be over Judea." It's a big deal to us because we have the Bible, and we understand how big of a place it was. It was not a big deal back then.

He married into a wealthy family. This was how he got the job. This is important to know: he upset the Jews twice already. He didn't like them. He upset them twice. This

is all written down in history. It gets back to Tiberius Caesar, and Tiberius Caesar says, "If you upset the Jews one more time, you're out." So, you're going to see he hates the Jews, disagrees with the Jews, but ultimately is going to do what the Jews want. I'll show you.

Let's look at verse 2. **"And Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' And he answered him, 'You have said so.'"** Basically, Pilate is trying to figure this out. "Why do they hate you so much? I don't get it. You don't seem to be the type of person who's building some massive revolt. You don't seem to be a threat and an offense." So he's just asking him.

Now look at what happens. Verse 3: **"And the chief priests accused him of many things. And Pilate again asked him, 'Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you.' But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed."** Literally, in the Greek, his mind was blown.

If you're Pilate, you have people coming into your court all the time. I'm sure none of you have ever gotten a speeding ticket and had to go to court, but if you have, you know what this is like. There are two options when you're in court, "I'm guilty" or "I'm not guilty," but you defend yourself no matter what.

If you're not guilty, you're like, "I have to defend myself because I'm not guilty, and I'm not going to get in trouble for this." If you did something wrong, you still try to defend yourself. "I went 15 over, but I wasn't paying attention, and it was really busy. I've had a good record. Could you let...?" It's just part of the human nature and human experience to defend yourself. Jesus does not defend himself. Pilate is amazed.

Let's keep going on. Verse 6: **"Now at the feast he [Pilate] used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas."** It couldn't be a worse guy is what he's trying to say.

"And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them [to release a prisoner]." Pilate is basically thinking, "Great." It's very obvious in all of the accounts. Pilate doesn't want to kill Jesus, but he doesn't want to upset the Jews, so he's trying to think, "Is there a third way? Can we, like... Okay, you scared him. Let's release him now." But they don't want that. Watch this.

"And he answered them, saying, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' For he perceived that it was out of envy..." And it was. **"...that the chief priests had delivered him up."** This is very key to understand the rest of the story. Look at verse 11. **"But the chief priests..."** Which would have been a small group of influential people, a small, very vocal minority.

"But the chief priests stirred up the crowd..." Do you know what the Greek word for *crowd* is? *Twitter*. No, but it's very similar. Isn't it interesting? We live in a society right now where it is a few people... I don't know how they did it then, but it's a few people who can be very loud, and they can influence a crowd. Let's look at what happens here.

"But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. And Pilate again said to them, 'Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' And they cried out again, 'Crucify him.'"

We have to understand that the natural condition of every person before they come to Christ is they're part of the crowd. Crowds are a very interesting thing. There's something called *herd philosophy*. There's something called the *madness of crowds*. There's a philosophy of crowds. There's what's called *groupthink*. There's mob mentality. They all talk about the same thing. I read about a lot of it this week.

It's very interesting. It's the whole idea that we act differently when we view ourselves as part of a crowd and not an individual. You'll see extreme examples. You'll see the riots, or something like that, and then they interview people afterward. It's like, "I have no idea why I was so angry. Yeah, I would never jump on a car if I was by myself. I would never break a window if I was by myself."

There's something about crowds that we get lost in them. There's an anonymity to crowds. There's a lack of responsibility in being a part of the crowd. Crowds change all the time. Right? If we went back just a few chapters, there was a crowd that was praising Jesus. It's debated even if they knew what they were fully doing, if they all really worshiped Jesus then, if they really thought he was. Some people think this is the exact same crowd, or at least part of this crowd is now doing *this*.

So, we see the crowd. We see Pilate. Look at what happens. **"And Pilate said to them, 'Why? What evil has he done?'"** This is interesting. Pilate, even though he is really a terrible guy, is the only guy who sees Jesus as truly innocent in the story. So, here's what he does now. **"But they shouted all the more..."** Here's the crowd. **"... 'Crucify him.' So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified."**

In all of these stories, we get to see who we want to be like and who we should not want to be like. You don't want to be like the crowd or like Pilate in this situation. The crowd is not thinking for themselves about Jesus. I mean, how many people just believe whatever the current culture... There's a group of celebrities who tell the crowd what to think about everything. Right?

Sometimes the chief priest is Fox News. Sometimes the chief priest is CNN. Sometimes the chief priest is some famous celebrity or some famous podcaster. They influence the crowd, and the crowd is no longer thinking for themselves in regard to anything, but I'm particularly talking about what they think about Jesus. So, you don't want to be like the crowd. You want to think for yourself.

You don't want to be like Pilate. Here's Pilate's problem, and I think this is a temptation for us: Pilate does what is safe and popular instead of what is right. Let me encourage you to begin to do, no matter what it is in your life... Can you make small decisions in your life, in your marriage, with your family, in your business, to do what is right instead of what is safe and popular? In fact, I probably don't need both words. Right? Whatever is popular is safe. It's safe because it *is* popular.

Here's what people think all the time: "When I have more status, when I am safer, I will be bolder." I just want to tell you that's not true. That's not what happens with people. I know Elon Musk is a controversial figure, but it's interesting. As you study his life, whatever you think about Twitter and all this other stuff...

People critique him and say, "Oh, yeah, I would do those things, I would be that bold, I would take on Tim Cook if I was wealthy." No, you wouldn't. The only reason Elon Musk has been doing these bold things, convictional things... Go read about what he has done. That's all he has done his whole life. So, don't believe the lie that you'll do what's right later, but right now you'll do what's safe and popular.

02 JESUS BEFORE SOLDIERS (MOCKERY)

So, he does what's safe and popular. He hands over Jesus. Look here. Verse 15: "***So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.***" He had Jesus beaten. We get from another account that he actually brings him back and puts him in front of all of the people and says a very famous phrase in Scripture: "Behold the man."

What most people think is happening here is Pilate wants to have him beaten so the people will see how beaten he is, and if there's any little residue of compassion in them, they'll be like, "What are we doing to this guy?" and they'll let him go. That's not what happens.

In fact, back then there were three types of scourging. There was low-level scourging. "We hit you a few times for a minor offense, and you'd better not do that again." Then there was kind of medium-level scourging, which was, "You did something pretty bad,

and we're going to make sure you have marks on your back forever, but you're going to be fine."

Then there was the third level of scourging, which is what Jesus gets. He is completely beaten. If you've seen *The Passion of the Christ*...organs exposed, muscle exposed, blood everywhere. Often, somebody would die. They only scourged people at this level who were headed for crucifixion. In some ways, it may have been a grace, because then they didn't even make it to the cross on many occasions.

Now, here's a thought I had this week and want to talk to you guys about for a little bit. Why did Jesus have to be wounded for us? If we have a theology that Jesus has to get to the cross, let's get him there as quickly as possible and let him die on the cross. We'll get there in a few minutes. Let him die in our place for our sins as our substitute, bear the wrath of God, and let's get out of here.

Why does he need to be beaten? Why does he need to be cut? Why does he need to be whipped? By the way, the Bible says, "By his stripes we are healed." I think about these verses, and then I think about, "Is there anything going on in culture that this speaks to?" I thought about self-harm. There's a rise in this coming generation with self-harm. I don't fully understand it.

I couldn't believe the stat I read this week, which said of 13- to 16-year-old girls, one in four will practice cutting at some point. I thought, "Really?" This has happened in our church. I mean, not often, but there have been a few times over the last six years a very confused and distraught mom and dad called one of our pastors and said, "I don't really understand it, but our daughter is cutting herself."

Now, self-harm can go to the extreme of... The ultimate self-harm is suicide. People say, "Why would...?" Let's just talk about cutting, because I guess this is a... Well, it's a peer contagion as well. Things spread very quickly among adolescent girls, so it spreads, like anorexia and other things have in the past.

There are a couple of reasons people cut themselves. One reason people cut themselves is... Well, to be honest with you (this is a small portion), they're narcissistic, and it's a way to get attention. "No one is looking at me, but if I cut myself, then maybe someone will look at me." That's a small reason people cut themselves.

From everything I read this week, the main reason people cut themselves is they feel so guilty. They feel so ugly. They feel like they've done... We've all had a version of this. Not cutting ourselves, but we've all had a version of maybe trying to punish ourselves. "Because I did *this*, I'm not spending any money anymore on any..." We've all had our own version of trying to punish ourselves.

Well, here's the hope of the gospel. Let me say, if there's anyone in here who's struggling with cutting, what we understand is, actually, you don't need to beat yourself up because Christ was beaten for you. This is the hope. You don't need to wound yourself because Christ was wounded for you. You don't need to cut yourself because Christ was cut.

There seems to be, with people who cut, some kind of relief that comes from seeing the blood. This is why you need a theology of the blood. There is no salvation in your own blood; there's only salvation in what Christ has done for us. Christians have a unique message. "You're actually worse than you thought. It's way worse than you think. You're in a way worse situation than you think, but the solution is not to cut yourself. The solution is to look at how Christ was wounded for you, and by his stripes you are healed."

So, he scourges him, and then look. Here comes the humiliation. Look at verse 16. ***"And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him."***

The crown of thorns is a picture and symbol of the curse that God said Adam was going to bear, humanity was going to bear. Remember that? The first thing after he sinned, he said, "Cursed is the ground that will bear thorns and thistles." Christ is symbolically wearing the curse for us. That's what's happening here.

Verse 18: ***"And they began to salute him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him..."*** Even today, that's the picture of... Probably the worst thing you could do to somebody for their self-image and for your disgust toward them would be to spit on them.

"And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him." Now, this is interesting. Pilate doesn't tell them to bully and mock and scorn and practice false worship and do all this, and they do this.

In fact, I want to show you a picture. Here's a picture. This is a 400-year-old painting of the mocking of Christ. It's an image that has haunted me this week as I've looked at it. It was at night, so that's why they had the fire. They're looking at him, and you can see they're smiling. They're completely making fun of him.

What they would do is they would play a game called *hot hands*. In another gospel, they say, "Prophecy to us, Christ." Here's what they would do. They would blindfold

the prisoner, and then five guys would stand around, and they'd say, "Here's what's going to happen. We're going to punch you in the face. Four of us are. One of us is not."

If you've ever been punched in the face, it hurts. If you've ever been punched in the face and not known it was coming, it *really* hurts, because you can't prepare for it. They basically said, "Here's what's going to happen. We're going to punch you in the face, four of the five of us. One of us is not. Prophecy to us. If you correctly choose the person who didn't punch you in the face, we won't punch you in the face again, but we're going to keep doing it until you get the person right."

So, you can see the types of psychological, emotional, and mental suffering Jesus is going through for you and me. You may ask, "God, why are you not just...?" You know what it's like if someone does something to *your* kid. You want to hurt and harm those who hurt and harm your kids. I'm not saying we do that, but I'm saying there's a visceral effect of "I want to stand up for my son." Well, God the Father is not because Christ has to go through this for us. I'll show you.

03 JESUS & SIMON OF CYRENE

"And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene..." Okay. The first person to come out of the crowd: Simon. ***"...who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross."*** Why do we care who he's the father of? Because church history tells us these two guys came to Christ, Simon came to Christ, and they started a church.

What's going to lead somebody to Christ is coming out of the crowd, having a personal experience with Christ on the cross, carrying the cross. If we were ever reading Jesus' words and had a romantic feeling about the cross... We romanticize carrying the cross. "Yes, I just have to carry my cross." You can't read the story of Simon of Cyrene and think it's romantic.

The beam they carried... In movies you see him carrying a whole cross. That's not what it was like. They would actually just carry the horizontal beam, which weighed 75 to 100 pounds. After being scourged and up all night and humiliated and mocked, it was too much for Christ to carry it, so Simon came alongside and carried it.

Verse 22: ***"And they brought him to the place called Golgotha..."*** The Latin word for *Golgotha* is *Calvary*. That's how we got the word *Calvary*. ***"...(which means Place of a Skull)."*** This is where he was crucified. ***"And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it."*** That was a narcotic of the day. It was to numb and

ease the pain. He doesn't take it because he wants to be fully conscious of what's happening.

"And they crucified him..." Look. This is very straightforward. **"...and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. And it was the third hour..."** Now, the way they did the day back then was 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. because they basically only worked during the sunlight. That's what they could do. So, it was basically sunrise to sunset. So, when you see *third hour*, think 9:00 a.m. When you hear *sixth hour*, think noon. When you hear *ninth hour*, that's 3:00.

"And the inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.'" In fact, if you put all of the Gospels together, it actually said, "Jesus of Nazareth." This is Pilate's final insult of Christ and of the Jews. "Jesus of Nazareth," because nothing good comes of Nazareth, so, that's humiliating that he's from Nazareth. "The King of the Jews."

It was written in Hebrew (the religious language), in Greek (the language of business and commerce), and in Latin (the language of law). This is symbolic. Christ died for every person. Every person needs to know why he died. It's written on the inscription. Here's what happens next. **"And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left."** Remember when John and James said they wanted to be on his right and his left? They didn't have *this* in mind.

"And those who passed by..." Here's more mocking. It's just constant. **"...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."**

It's interesting, because in Luke's account we're told right before Christ dies, one of those who was crucified with him says, basically, "Can I be forgiven? Remember me when you enter into your kingdom," and he says, "Today you're going to come with me in the kingdom," which means sometime in between Mark's gospel and Luke's gospel, one of the robbers, the criminals, repents and believes in Christ. This is the first deathbed conversion.

What's encouraging about this is most people think... We don't know. We're trying to put a story together. Most people think it's when the robber heard one of the seven words Christ spoke from the cross, most likely the word, "Father, forgive them." The

experience of seeing Jesus forgive those who were crucifying him changed this criminal's heart.

What you have here is more and more...I can't overemphasize it because it's everywhere...more mocking, more scorn, more shame, more humiliation, more derision. What they're saying here is, "Come on down off the cross." Jesus didn't say this to them, but, basically, "I can't save myself and save you. What's holding me on this cross is ultimately not the nails. It's a love for people and an obedience to God."

04 JESUS & GOD THE FATHER (DARKNESS)

I'll show you what happens. Here's kind of the locus of it. Verse 33: "***And when the sixth hour had come...***" That would be the brightest time of the day, 12:00. "***...there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.***" By the way, there are at least four other sources outside the Bible that confirm this darkness. It was a unique darkness that happened for three hours.

Why would there be darkness? Well, in the Bible, *darkness* means different things. Sometimes by *darkness* the Bible means wicked deeds. Sometimes the Bible will say, "Men love the darkness, and they won't come into the light." What do they love? Sinful deeds. Other times, the Bible will say men are *in* darkness, and then it'll say something like, "They're in darkness, and they don't understand." So, there's the darkness of rebellion and evil deeds, and there's the darkness of ignorance.

That's not what *this* is talking about. This is the darkness of judgment. This is the darkness of the frown of God. This is the darkness of displeasure. If you're a Jewish person reading this story, you're like, "Oh, I know what this is." The most famous darkness in the Old Testament is the ninth plague where God covers the land with darkness right before the tenth plague. What is that? The killing of the firstborn.

This is pointing us back... You know, it takes the whole Bible to make the whole Christian. It's all connected here. What's happening with the darkness is God is about to, in three hours... It's very specific. From the sixth hour to the ninth hour there was darkness. Here's what it's saying: this is God pouring out his wrath and his judgment on Jesus instead of us. This is the hope of Christianity.

I don't fully understand exactly how it works. Here's what we know. At the end of time, the Bible says... If you read Revelation 19-22, it says that at the end of time, heaven comes to earth. There's a new heaven and a new earth, and it's coming down. So, at the very end of time, heaven comes to earth, but at the cross hell came to earth.

What we believe is that somehow God poured out an eternal and infinite amount of hell on Jesus for three hours. I guess Jesus could handle it because of the infinite and eternal nature of who he is, but all of the intensity and the anger and the displeasure and the disappointment and the wrath of God falls on Christ, and he absorbs our punishment. This is our great hope. Look at what happens.

"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?'" This is the only time that Jesus talks to the Father and says, "My God." He usually uses much more intimate terms: *Father, Abba*. He uses a term twice ("My God, my God"). Every time Jesus uses a term twice it's a term of endearment. "Martha, Martha" or "Simon, Simon."

It's a term of endearment, and it's an expression of the feeling of loss, that God the Father has been separated from him so that we could be reunited to God the Father. The longer you love somebody... You see this with a marriage. Say a great marriage. They're married for 50 years, and then one spouse loses the other spouse. It's so hard because for so long they had a loving, meaningful, deep relationship.

Well, imagine this from eternity past. This was the first time there was any type of separation. This is what Christ does for us. He's willing to go through this, and so is God the Father, for us. Look at what happens here. **"And some of the bystanders hearing it..."** They didn't understand the original language. **"Behold, he is calling Elijah."** Because he said, "Eloi."

"And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine..." This is not an act of grace. This is an act of "Drink some more, so you'll stay awake some more, so you'll see that Elijah doesn't come." It's another insult. **"...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.' And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last."**

We know from another account that the loud cry was "It is finished!" which is a great and hopeful word. It's not "It is mostly done" or "It is for the most part done, but you still need to do something." This is "It is done. I have been waiting for this." By the way, this is the very end, and now it's over. This is the end of Jesus' humiliation.

The Bible teaches Christ had to go through humiliation to exaltation. The beginning of his humiliation was being born, taking on human flesh. He dealt with multiple humiliations through his life, being misunderstood and mistreated by family and friends and religious leaders. Then he goes through the great humiliation we just read, and then from this point on, it's all the exaltation of Christ.

The most important thing that happens is in verse 38. This is the most important verse, theologically and practically, in this chapter. **"And the curtain of the temple**

was torn in two, from top to bottom." You may go, "It's just a throwaway verse." No, no. This curtain was 10 inches thick. Not a normal curtain. It was 60 feet wide. It was 30 feet tall. Tradition tells us it took 300 men to hang this curtain.

This is the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. The Holy Place different people could go to from time to time. The Most Holy Place was where God's manifest felt presence dwelt, so there was a massive curtain. What's being communicated with a massive curtain that's 10 inches thick? "Stay out." That's the message. In fact, the high priest was allowed to go in... Just one guy got to go in one day a year.

Before he would go in, they would keep him up at night, because he was afraid he would sin in his dreams, because they didn't understand dreams. He didn't want to sin in his dream, so he would pull an all-nighter before he would go in. Then there were all of these special instructions. He put blood on himself, the blood of goats, and then they would tie a rope around his ankle.

They would stay in the Holy Place, and he would walk into the Most Holy Place. They did the rope so that if he did anything wrong and God killed him, they would just pull him out from underneath the curtain. We don't have anything this serious today. Today we live in a society... "Oh, yeah. Can't anybody just *whatever* and *whenever*? Isn't God just our buddy and our copilot?"

What happens is the immediate time that Jesus breathes his last, the curtain is ripped. This is important. First of all, man couldn't rip that curtain. It was 10 inches thick. But just so God could really communicate it, he rips it from top to bottom, saying, "I'm the one doing this." The message changes from "Stay out..." This is important. This is the difference between the Old Testament and New Testament.

The message in the Old Testament was "Stay away. Don't touch the mountain. Moses will speak to me, not you guys." The message in the New Testament is "Come. Everybody, come. There has been a way. The sacrificial system is over. The priesthood is over. You don't have to go through anybody else. You go directly to God through Jesus Christ."

05 JESUS & THOSE WHO BELIEVE (BURIAL)

Then look at what happens here. ***"And when the centurion..."*** Huh. Sometimes you come out of the crowd. Sometimes you come out of the soldiers. Look at what happens here. *Centurion* means he who is over 100 people, so he had a big job in the military. ***"And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he***

breathed his last... "The moment Jesus breathes his last, look at what happens. "...he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God!'"

We're supposed to see... What were all of the soldiers doing? Mocking. What happens at the death of Christ? One soldier confesses him as Christ. It's the opposite of mocking. This guy would have been the wrong race. He would have been the wrong religion. He would have had the wrong job, if we're looking from how the Jews would have viewed him, and he's the first convert to Christianity after Christ dies.

It's interesting. He's also the first human to recognize Jesus as the Son of God in the gospel of Mark. Twenty weeks ago, when we introduced this book... Mark introduces it as the *gospel of the Son of God*. Then God calls him the *Son of God* at baptism. God the Father calls him the *Son of God* at the transfiguration. The demons call him the *Son of God* a couple of times. This is the first time a human recognizes him as the Son of God.

But it gets more interesting. Look at what happens. ***"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..."*** They're the only humans in the Bible who, we're told, ministered to Jesus. Angels ministered to Jesus after his temptation. Everybody else Jesus ministers to, but these women uniquely ministered to him.

Women are unbelievably important in the New Testament, especially. They are going to be the last people at the cross. They are going to be the last people at the tomb before they have to go home for the Sabbath. They're going to be the first people at the tomb at the resurrection. They're going to be the first evangelists. This is really interesting because women had no status back then and couldn't witness in court. So why would you put women in the story? Because they were there. Because it really happened.

So, here's what happens. ***"...and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem."*** This is really interesting. Verse 42: ***"And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea..."*** You've probably not thought a lot about him before. Let's look at him together. ***"...a respected member of the council..."*** So, first a high-level Greek, a soldier. Now a high-level Jew. This is what's happening.

"...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."

Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in all four gospels, and he is unbelievably important. We tend to think today in our American mindset that if somebody dies, you honor the body. It doesn't matter who they were. It doesn't matter how they died. It doesn't matter how they lived. If somebody dies overseas fighting a war, we go, rightly so, to great lengths to get their body back here. We just have an honor.

It's actually a very Judeo-Christian idea. We honor the body. Well, back then they didn't have that. I mean, the Romans didn't care. In fact, what they would often do was they would leave the body on the cross as a warning for weeks. They had a lot of crosses, and they were crucifying people all over the place. So, it was a warning, like, "If you come into the city of Rome, this is what happens if you rebel."

So, without Joseph you could have potentially had the body stay on the cross, but if they would have taken it off the cross... They didn't give criminals a burial. They threw criminals' bodies in gehenna. That's what Jesus uses as the picture of hell. It's a constantly on-fire trash heap. That's what they would do. They didn't care. "You're a criminal. You've gone across Rome, and there you go."

So, think about this. Without Joseph of Arimathea, we have no proof of the resurrection. By the way, God is coordinating all of this. God works two ways: by miracle and by providence. He's working providentially through these people to have this happen.

Now, here's what we're told about Joseph of Arimathea in John's gospel: he was a secret disciple. It says he was a secret disciple, and then in *this* gospel it says he finally took courage and went public. One of the most critical moments in the life and ministry of Christ and in church history is when, basically, a wealthy guy with status decides to stop being a secret Christian.

I mean, I don't know how it works for you guys. Some of you, you know you're a Christian, Jesus knows you're a Christian, and your wife thinks you might be a Christian. She's not sure some days. Just think about it. This is the power. He could do what other people couldn't do, but he had to decide to step out, step up, speak out.

To have your own tomb (most people think this was one of his extra tombs), you have a lot of money. To be able to go directly to Pilate and ask for it, you have a lot of status. I want to encourage all of us, to whatever extent we have, to begin to leverage our affluence and our influence for Christ and his kingdom. This is what's happening. This is a key moment.

We actually see something very tender about Joseph. We may not notice it because of how we think about things, but look at verse 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. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid."

Here's what's really interesting. Back then, men did not touch dead bodies, especially wealthy men. In fact, we're told in John's account that his good friend Nicodemus comes and helps, also a secret Christian who decides to come out. The two of them together are able to do something no one else was able to do. They're able to face death because they understood the death of Christ. They weren't avoiding death.

Now look. Jesus Christ died... I told you it was painful, and it was purposeful. We've seen the pain. Here's the purpose. The purpose of Jesus dying is so that people who are in the crowd will come out of the crowd and become the church. I don't know where each of you are, but I just want to encourage you.

If you are still a part of the crowd...you have not thought about Christ for yourself...consider the centurion who left those who mocked Christ and confessed him as Christ. Consider Simon of Cyrene. We don't know if he was in the crowd or not, but he was certainly around them. He comes out, and he has a personal experience with Christ, and it changes him.

Be like Joseph of Arimathea who comes out of hiding. You know, Christianity is a small piece of the pie to mention. He took courage and made a courageous move. I believe this is what our nation is looking for. It's looking for people who understand death and, therefore, can face death with courage.

I don't know if you remember this. Of course you'll remember 9/11. When 9/11 happened and the Towers fell, they did something... They'd probably done this before in history, but they hadn't done this in a long time. They landed all commercial flights in the United States, and not just for the day. Of course for that first day. In fact, for a long time, the only plane in the air was Air Force One, and George Bush was flying around.

They landed every plane, and then for the next few days they said, "No planes." They were doing a special service in DC. George Bush said, "We have to do this service because I have to go speak to the nation." He said, "But I don't feel like I'm ready to speak to the nation about this. I need to bring someone up here to comfort me, and I need somebody who will speak to the nation." So he said, "We need to go get Billy Graham."

The problem was Billy was in his 80s, and the problem was they said no commercial flights. So, they had to get the Pentagon's approval to fly a private plane to Black Mountain, North Carolina. They said, "There are no other planes flying in the whole

nation except one private plane bringing Billy Graham to DC," because they needed somebody who could speak to the nation.

George Bush said, "I need someone who can comfort me." They went to the guy who understands what Christ has done. What Billy Graham did was he spoke to the nation a word of hope and a word of resurrection and a word of renewal in the midst of death. I've heard it said that one of the greatest things you could do would be to be the strongest person at your dad's funeral.

What would your life have to be like that if your dad died, you would be the person that other people would say, "I can depend on you"? When your life collapses and everything around you, you have a view of Christ... Now, my friend, who I went and saw, preached his dad's funeral. It was one of the most moving experiences of my life to watch a young man talk about the loss of his dad but the hope they had of resurrection and being reunited. Let's pray.

Lord, we would like to be our own version of Billy Graham. Of course, he's a giant, but we would like to understand Christ and the cross in such a way that we wouldn't fear our own death, in such a way that outside of just being useful to ourselves that maybe we could be useful to other people. Lord, would you give us a picture...?

As we're about to go into Communion, I think maybe what some of us need to be like is not like Joseph or the centurion or Simon. We need to be like the women. The women stayed and just thought about it. They just looked. I pray that we would look at the cross and we would look above the cross at the inscription. The inscription really says, "Christ died for the world." It says, "Jesus in my place." It says, "On behalf of anyone who would repent and believe." Lord, would we be a cross-centered, cross-shaped church and people. We pray this in your name, amen.