

The Meaning of the Cross

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[0 : 00] And our final reading is from Mark 15, and this is the text upon which our teaching this afternoon is based. 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. And when the sixth hour had come, there was a darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama, sabachthani, which means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And some of the bystanders hearing it said, Behold, he is calling to 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.

[1 : 27] 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.

Let's pray. Our God, by your Holy Spirit, we ask that you would tell us now from this very famous and important historical reality, the story of Jesus' crucifixion, that you would come now and show us what we need to hear, show us what we ought to do to respond to the cross of Jesus Christ. So we pray that, Lord, by your Spirit and the help that Jesus gives. In Christ's name, amen. So we just read the crucifixion account that Mark records in his gospel, and we'll reflect on that for just a few minutes together before we finish.

We didn't read this verse, but if you have a Bible, you can see back in verse 20, it says that the soldiers, after they captured him, they beat him and they mocked him, and then they all went out to crucify him.

Now, one commentator writes this. He says, Crucifixion was a terrible thing, a very terrible thing.

[3 : 00] And there's all sorts of accounts we have from Roman writers, for example, about crucifixion. So Cicero, he said, a famous philosopher from many centuries ago, he said that crucifixion is the most cruel and horrifying punishment, the terror apparatus of the empire.

And Quintilian, another Roman writer, he says, whenever we crucify the guilty, the most crowded roads are chosen, where the most people can see it and be moved by fear.

So crucifixion was a terrible thing, both physically, but also in terms of public shame, a very shameful thing. And one contemporary 21st century writer, James Edwards, he says, Crucifixion was a ghastly form of death, excruciatingly painful, prolonged, and socially degrading.

And that basically captures what the Roman Empire used it for. And when you read Mark on the crucifixion, none of that shows up. There's not a single word about the physical horror.

It's the briefest little remark. They beat him, they mocked him, they sent him to die. Mark doesn't tell us anything. There's not even, in the text, there's not even emotion language.

[4 : 13] Mark doesn't use a single adjective of emotion language to describe the horror of this moment. Why? Why? I think because Mark, the gospel writer, he wants us to look at what this means.

He wants us to see less and think less, perhaps, about the physical torture and the horror of what so many people experienced in the Roman Empire. So many.

He wants us to ask, but what does this moment mean? What does it mean for me? What does it mean for you? What does it mean for all of world history? What is it about this moment? In 8071, Spartacus was defeated by the Roman Empire.

And they crucified 6,000 people at the defeat of Spartacus. So many people were crucified. Why is it that this one particular man on this one particular cross changed the world?

Why this? And there's a hint at it in verse 39 at the very end of the passage that we read. The centurion, this soldier, and think about his life. Boy, a centurion in the Roman Empire, he had been to so many crucifixions.

[5 : 19] He had been part of so many crucifixions. Yet, when he's watching this crucifixion after he had been the one who mocked Jesus and put him on the cross, in verse 39, he all of a sudden looks up and says, truly, this man was the Son of God.

You see, in the centurion's life there, something broke through. Something changed. Where all of a sudden, after thousands of crucifixions, he had seen there was something about this one that changed his life.

So what is that? And let me just highlight. I think the centurion probably had a breakthrough because of two things that happened, two things that he saw. So I just want to point them out to you and say a bit about them, and we'll finish.

What did the centurion see? First, he saw the darkness cover the land that day, and then he heard the cry of Jesus. And I think that changed his life.

And maybe it can for you, too, today. Okay, so first he saw the darkness cover the land. So I just want to cover two verses. That's all. Verse 33, the sixth hour had come. There was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

[6 : 24] So Jesus is on the cross, and at noon, darkness came over Jerusalem for three hours. Now, why? What's going on here? Some have come and said, well, you know, it was a solar eclipse, but that's the wrong season for a solar eclipse, the Passover season.

Solar eclipses don't happen during this time. This was not a natural event. The Bible says this was a supernatural event. And the Old Testament talks about this event centuries before it ever took place.

So in Amos 8, verse 9, the Bible says, On that day, God speaks, I will darken the earth in the midst of broad daylight. And so Christians for centuries now have taken that prophecy of Amos and said that it was fulfilled in this moment when Jesus was hanging on the cross and darkness covered the land for three hours.

But the question is, why does this happen? Why does darkness cover the land? And to really understand, I think, what God is communicating to us, you've got to just take a minute and back up to the very beginning of the Bible, to Genesis chapter 1, to understand a little bit about what darkness means.

And in Genesis 1, we learn that in the beginning when God created the world, the first thing that took place was there was darkness over the whole world, the whole cosmos. It was darkness. And then God spoke and God said, Let there be light.

[7 : 44] And light came in and creation happened and order filled the world. And it was harmonious and beautiful and glorious. And ever since then, after sin came into the world in Genesis 3, all throughout the Bible in the Old Testament, any instance of darkness is often seen as an instance of judgment.

Why? Because it's seen as a reversal of the creation order that God had first put into place. So we went from darkness to light. But then all throughout world history, there's these moments of darkness.

And these moments of darkness are moments of judgment. You think about the darkness that went over the land of Egypt during the ten plagues. It's a statement of judgment. It's like de-creation. It's like the world is being uncreated. It's going back. It's not supposed to be that way. Darkness. It shouldn't be like that. And in this moment, darkness falls over the land. And it's saying that at the cross, it should not be this way.

Boy, the creator of the world, the light of the universe himself, being murdered at the hands of human beings, the people he created, talk about de-creation. Talk about the undoing of all that should be.

[8 : 48] This is an utter reversal of everything that's good. That's why the darkness came over the land. Mark has no emphasis here on the physical horror of this moment because the greater pain,

the greater horror that's being talked about here is the spiritual reality, the spiritual horror that's falling upon.

And it's being exhibited in the physical darkness that comes over the land in this moment. Why was Jesus plunged into darkness? And the reason is, if you put all the pieces together in the Bible, what we learn here is the reason the darkness has come over the land is because Jesus has been plunged into spiritual darkness.

And the reason for that is because he has taken on in this moment our darkness. See, the first thing we learn here is that the darkness that has come over the land is a physical representation of the fact that Jesus has taken on our darkness in this moment.

We have darkness in our lives. We have darkness in our hearts. Ever since the light of the world made us and shone his light upon us, we've chose darkness instead of light.

We've chose selfishness instead of actually serving the God who made us. I don't know if you've ever had the opportunity to go do a cave dive or to go deep down into a deep cave.

[10:02] I've had that chance once or twice in my life. And when you do that, you go deep, deep down into these caves and you go through these narrow passageways. It's awful. Don't do it. You feel like you're stuck. You're never going to come out.

But the tour guide will do the same thing every cave dive you go to. I've only been to two, so I'm 100% so far on this. What does he do? He takes you down to the bottom of the cave, and then all of a sudden he says, all right, everybody grab your loved ones because I'm about to turn the lights off. And they will flick the lights off, and it may be that you've never experienced utter darkness, but when you're deep down in the heart of the cave, it happens. And when you experience utter darkness, it is so disorientating.

You lose your balance. You can't stand properly. The darkness completely engulfs you, and in a sense, it demolishes you. It disintegrates you.

It destroys you. I was watching a documentary recently, and one of the scholars on the documentary was saying that humans can only stand about 17 days of utter darkness until they die.

[11:07] So the idea was that if you put somebody into total darkness, they can only last about 17 days on average, and they'll just disintegrate. They'll die. We can't take it. You see, Jesus Christ was plunged down into utter darkness because he was wearing and carrying the burden of the darkness that is in our hearts, the darkness that we brought into this world.

The light of life made us and shone his life on us, and yet we chose to go into the cave. We chose to serve self instead of serve the God who made us. And so we are walking through this world. Boy, we're walking through this world in darkness. We don't know who we are quite often. We don't know where we come from. We don't know what we're to do with ourselves. What's the meaning and purpose of our lives?

We're walking through darkness. Jesus Christ in this moment took it on. The centurion saw it. I think that's the first thing he saw. Secondly and lastly, I think the centurion's life was changed in this moment because not only did he see the darkness and start to realize what was happening, but then he heard Jesus cry out.

So we call this cry in verse 34 the cry of dereliction. Jesus cries out and says, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And the centurion, this man, he would have seen so many crucifixions, right?

[12:28] And one thing he would have known very well better than anybody is that normally in crucifixion, it takes a long time for the person to die. So quite often we have reports that crucifixion would take days.

And what would happen is for the first day, a person could still draw breath a little bit and speak, but eventually they would get so exhausted that they could no longer speak. And sometimes it would take many days.

But Jesus, he died fairly early in the crucifixion process. And he gathered enough strength in this moment to cry out. The other gospels use a Greek word that says that he shrieked.

He screamed. And he said, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And in the other gospels, we also learned that in this moment, he said, I yield, Father, my spirit.

I give myself over to death. And we learned that Jesus said, I've been forsaken, and now it's time for me to die. He knew it. He knew it was the moment for him to die. He knew that he didn't need to last for days.

[13:30] He knew that once he was forsaken, he could die. Why? Why? What's going on? The centurion saw it. He started to see something strange. What's going on here is that darkness is more than just our sinful condition.

The darkness that he was plunged into is more than just him taking on the sins of the world. It's something further. And when he cries out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

He is saying in that moment that he has been plunged into such the depths of hell that he has lost all intimacy with God the Father. That's the darkness he totally entered into.

He went down into hell itself in this moment, and he experienced the punishment, the hell that our sin, that our darkness deserves. It wasn't just that he took on our sins. It was that our sins plunged him into total abandonment from God the Father to God the Son, to Jesus Christ in this moment. He lost everything in this moment. And that means that he didn't just get our condition. He got what we deserved. And so the clouds covered everything, and the physical land, the darkness, manifests the reality that he was plunged into hell in this moment.

[14:42] So if you confess, as a Christian, the Apostles' Creed, we say this in the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed says, Jesus Christ descended into hell. When?

Right here, in this moment, at the cross, he was plunged into utter darkness. He was punished by the wrath of God for our sake. Like, the only person in world history who ever deserved, when he said, my God, my God, the only person, the only person who could say, my God, my God, and deserved to hear the words, my son, my son, he got deafening silence.

So that today, you, who have walked in darkness in your life, when you cry out to God, could hear God say, my son, my son, my daughter, my daughter.

Now what can you do with this, the cross? And I'll finish with this. First, let me give you three quick applications. First, here's what you can do with this today. Number one, see that there is no message like this in all of world history.

That's the first thing. And the Bible says that this moment is foolishness and a stumbling block to anybody who encounters it. It's totally unexpected.

[15:59] One of the things to know, the foolishness, the stumbling block that this is, is that this came in a moment that was so, so unexpected in the culture that it arrived in. The Jewish religion was not looking for this.

The Greeks were not looking for this. The Romans were not looking for a Messiah, the God who would die. It was completely unexpected. And you think about how unexpected this is to the norms of culture in the first century or the 21st century.

It's the same thing. We look for God to be on display, how? In power, right? But Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came displaying power through utter weakness.

You know, the might of the empire is what we expect. Somebody better than Caesar. But yet he came and gave himself to Roman crucifixion. What do we expect? We expect to see the smartest person in the room.

We expect, we expect in our culture, we want to be wise, we want to be smart people. But Jesus Christ came displaying the wisdom of God and what the Bible says was utter foolishness to the culture. We want to be good people.

[17:03] We want to be able to say, I'm a good person. But the cross comes and subverts that. The cross is the most equalizing force in human history because it looks out and says, every single person has to look at the cross and say, I crucified him.

My sins put in there. I'm not good. I'm in darkness. I need mercy. Right? We want, boy, we want the good life and we sure expect a king to come into this world, God himself, and live the good life, the life of an emperor.

But what did Jesus choose? He sacrificed all comfort and chose death itself for our sake. This is totally unexpected. This is unlike anything else that's been in all of world history.

We didn't read this, but in verse 21 in Mark's gospel, he says that when Jesus went to be crucified, the soldiers chose a man from the crowd named Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross to the hill for him.

And then Mark mentions this one little clause. He says, Simon of Cyrene carried the cross of Jesus he was the father of Rufus and Alexander. And you say, boy, I know that when I'm told in the seminary, we tell the students, if you're going to write a good essay, you cut extraneous details.

[18 : 13] If you're going to preach a good sermon, you cut extraneous details that do not matter. And here in the middle of the gospel, Mark's gospel, he says, Simon of Cyrene carried the cross.

By the way, he was the dad of Rufus and Alexander. Why does he say that? You know that Rufus is mentioned in the book of Romans. What's going on there? Mark is saying, by the way, if you want to know more about this, go and ask Rufus and Alexander because it was their dad.

He's saying that these are real people and you can go ask the boys that were there where their dad carried the cross. In other words, this is historical. It's real. It's evidenced. There's never been anything like it in world history.

So let me ask you, will you see that today? Maybe if you look closely, it'll be something that you will want to give your life to. Secondly, the cross is where God says to you, I love you and I loved you long before you were ever looking for that.

So at the end of this passage, when Jesus dies, the curtain tears in two in the temple from top to bottom. This was the place that divided the normal people from the Holy of Holies, the place behind the curtain where God's holiness dwelt, God's very presence.

[19 : 27] And in this moment, when Jesus died, the curtain ripped in two. Why? It's very simple. It's saying today, because of the cross of Jesus Christ, no matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter where you've come from, you can have access to God.

Today, because of the cross, no matter what you've believed in your past, no matter what you've done in your life, you can have access to God. And so maybe today is a day where for the first time or for, in a state of renewal, you might come and pray.

Because today, you have access to God. God will actually hear you because the cross is torn in two. That's right, the curtain is torn in two. Thirdly and finally, it could be the case today, maybe you've come in from the Royal Mile today just checking things out.

You might have come and said, I've been indifferent to this message my whole life. I've been indifferent to the cross my whole life. I've ignored God my whole life. Let me say, that is exactly why Jesus came.

Don't stay away from Jesus because you're not religious. Don't stay away from Jesus because you feel like I haven't performed enough. I haven't done enough good in my life yet.

[20 : 41] Don't stay away. This is exactly who Jesus, you are exactly who Jesus came for. He's got you right where he wants you when you say, I've not lived my life for God. I've not done great things for God. I've ignored God.

I have been in the darkness. He has you right where he wants you. This is exactly what the cross is for. Let me finish with an excerpt from the writings of Malcolm Muggeridge.

Malcolm Muggeridge was an English journalist. He became a Christian later in life and he writes about rejecting the cross, rejecting Christianity all throughout his childhood and into his early adult years.

This is what he says. He said, I would catch a glimpse of a cross, maybe two pieces of wood, accidentally nailed together, maybe on a telegraph pole when I was a kid.

And suddenly, my heart would stand still. In an instinctive, intuitive way, I understood that something more important was at issue than just our personal good causes, however admirable our good causes might be.

[21 : 46] This symbol, which was considered to be foolishness at my house, was yet the focus of inconceivable hope. As I remember this, a sense of my own failure would lie heavily upon me.

I should have worn the cross of Jesus Christ over my heart, a precious standard, never to be wrested out of my hands. It should have been my religion.

It should have been my uniform. It should have been my language. It should have been my life. I have no excuse. I paid no attention to the cross. I knew from the beginning the power of the cross, but for many years, I turned away.

And then he writes, until one day, I didn't. Now, remember the centurion, he had seen people crucified so many times. You know, he had seen it thousands of times, but then one day, he passed by this cross, and he saw the power.

And it could be that you have passed by. You know, you're like a bystander on the road. They would always crucify people on the road, and you've walked by the cross of Jesus Christ so many times, like Malcolm Ugarage, and he said, I don't know.

[22 : 57] I don't know what this means. And today, Jesus Christ is coming to you by the Spirit and saying, the light of life plunged into utter darkness so that you today could know life and light.

The forgiveness of sins, it can be yours. Let us pray. Father, we ask today that you would grasp hold of hearts by faith.

Lord, give the gift of faith today in the power of the cross. Give the gift of faith today, not in the symbol itself, not in the cross itself, but in the man, Jesus, the Son of God.

Lord Christ, we thank you for the power that you have gifted us through the cross, the forgiveness of sins. And so we come today seeking your Spirit, asking that you would now, as we sing, as we close, come and meet with us, touch our hearts, show us once more our darkness and yet your light.

Show us once more how much we need your light in our lives. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.