

Shall we open our Bibles this morning to the gospel of Mark 15:21 as we continue our verse-by-verse journey through Mark's gospel? And we arrive this morning at the cross. It is our plan to spend the next three weeks - three Sunday mornings - with Jesus, there at Calvary, before we move on to the reactions and all and then to the resurrection.

Mark has shown us the path that led our Lord here - the willing surrender at Gethsemane, the six very illegal, hurried trials in the night before the religious leaders and then before the political leaders as well. We saw Pilate struggling between conscience and convenience. And if you know anything about walking with the Lord, you know that can be a big fight sometimes - knowing what is right and then yet the crowds demanding that you conform. We watched Pilate squirm or try to eliminate his responsibility. He could not. He finally hands Jesus over to be crucified. It is 6:00 in the morning when the Roman soldiers take Him and strip off His clothes and put a robe on Him and mock Him and then re-put His clothes back on and send Him to Calvary. From the Praetorium, which is on the Temple Mount - the Antonia Fortress, Jesus is given a cross to bear. I can't imagine what He looks like. Isaiah says (in chapter 52:14) that He couldn't be recognized as a man. It elicited great grief amongst the crowds. Even those who didn't know Him, wept. He barely got out of the city. The practice of the Romans was to cause the prisoner to go as far as he could through town, carrying his cross so that the warning would be out. "You don't get away with anything here. We're strict." As Jesus came out, according to Matthew 27:32, they took the cross from Jesus, and they forcibly laid it upon Simon of Cyrene, the fellow that they had commissioned and that we looked at last week, who had come from so far, 800 miles, just, maybe, for his first time in town. And he was just passing through, he was just getting into town. And he came in as a religious man. But, as we talked about last week, by the time his experience of bearing the cross behind Jesus is finished, his family will come to know the Lord and will play a large part in the early church.

Suffice it to say that this was a horrible time. When it comes to the crucifixion, there is very little description in the Bible about the physical nature of it. I know you've seen, maybe, the movie that Mel Gibson put out, "The Passion of the Christ," and it focuses on the physical; and it is moving, certainly, and hard to watch. But

the Bible doesn't say much at all about the physical struggle that Jesus faces. It is all about why - why He came, who benefits, and what you need to do to apply it to your own life. And in that aspect, only, that movie missed the mark, and I guess it really wasn't meant to save; it was meant to portray the physical suffering of Christ.

From history we know that every prisoner, when he was condemned to death by the Romans, was not only marched through town, but there was a soldier that would go before him, bearing a sign with the charges against him or what he has been found guilty of. And then taken outside of town, always in a very conspicuous place, so that people passing by on the road would see this was a deterrent. There couldn't have been much of a more busy time than Passover into town. And so, as you get this picture of our Lord weakened and beaten, and the soldier carrying the sign, "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS," carried in three languages, the crowd stands along the streets, mocking. Some are weeping. Simon is forced to go before. We read, in verse 21 here of Mark 15, that "they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross. And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull." Mark leaves out anything else in the middle. He is interested, and I think we've mentioned a lot to you, in the doing of Jesus. So the words "and," a connecting word which denotes continuous action, and "immediately" are found a lot in Mark's gospel. He is interested that you walk away knowing Jesus willingly and without hesitancy, and He was ready to go meet the task at hand.

We read (in Luke 23:27) that "a great multitude of the people followed Him" as He was headed for the cross, and, standing along the roadside, there were many women who "lamented Him." It's a word that means to weep or to cry. They had been touched by what they saw. These aren't the ladies who we will find there at the cross, first and last there - first at the tomb, the ones who had followed out of Galilee to support Jesus' needs and that of the disciples. These were women of town. These were daughters of Jerusalem. These were Jews in town for the Passover. And they wept when they saw the Lord so beaten and abused. They "lamented." I don't know if you've ever been to a boxing match where a boxer lost badly, but it's hard to watch. And so, as they began to weep, Jesus stopped along the roadside (Luke 23:28 tells us), and He says, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, "Blessed are the barren, wombs that never bore,

and breasts which have never nursed!" Then they will begin "to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!' " For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?" " One of the things that I think you walk away with from the gospels (understanding) is that everything that happened to Jesus, as we walk with Him to the cross, has to do with saving lives. I mean, it's the reason He came. It's the method by which man is saved. The cross and the empty tomb. It's the message of the gospel. It's the message of hope. And without that, we certainly have no hope. And so everything that you read as you watch, you can watch the Lord just bringing the message of His love to the people. And the Lord speaks to these women standing along the wayside as the Roman soldiers are moving the crowds along, and He stops before a group of them, and He calls them "Daughters of Jerusalem." It's a title that you'll find oftentimes used in the Old Testament for the nation itself. And He tells them to stop weeping for Him. I'm sure that's why they were weeping. It was horrible to see how He'd been mishandled and mistreated. But that wasn't His concern. His concern was their lives. "Don't weep for Me. Weep for you. I'm fine. It is your future that is not secure. You're in grave danger - you and your children." And you find the Lord constantly, even at this time.....His ardent love is not all about Him. His heart is for the lost. To the bitter end, He's come for them all. Zechariah, the prophet, writes (9:9), "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey." These daughters hadn't responded yet, in faith, to Jesus. But with great emotion, they were heartbroken, they felt His suffering. And Jesus says, "It's going to get a whole lot worse here. In fact, the time is coming when you have no children will be a blessed condition." To the Jews, and at least in the mentality that they held towards God, they often believed that barrenness, from a cultural standpoint, was equated with God's curse. It was, in the 1st century, still legal grounds for divorce. So for Jesus to say, "It'll be a blessed time when you can't have kids," that was an inconceivable thought to these ladies. And yet Jesus was drawing them in.

Within forty years of this event, the holocaust would begin. Titus and the Tenth Roman Legion would surround the city of Jerusalem, would cut off their supplies. The food got to be so bad that cannibalism began to be practiced in the city itself. The assault left hundreds of thousands of people dead the first day. Josephus writes in his writings, "*The Wars of the Jews*" (books V and VI), about the dispersion, the overthrow of Jerusalem. And the Jews ran out of town, and they

didn't have a homeland until 1948. So, gosh, it's so long ago. Yeah, but just in our last generation, they were back.

The calamity for the people was that God's Word was ignored, that His Son - so promised to the nation who had the Scriptures and the prophets - rejected. Great opportunity and yet they say to Pilate words that should still kind of send chills down your spine. They said (Matthew 27:25), "May His blood be upon us and upon our children. We don't care. Kill Him!"

Back in Mark 12:1, Jesus had told a parable to these folks, and He had talked to them (in great measure) through this parable about how the Lord had been patient with them. It's called the parable of the wicked vinedressers. He talked about a man who had planted a vineyard and hedged it about, and dug a place for the wine vat to be buried, and a tower to keep people away, and how he had prepared the fields, and then had leased out this vineyard to the vinedressers - those who would take care of it. And then he left, went to a far place. And when the vintage time came, and the owner wanted to receive the fruit of his vineyard, he sent some to them, and rather than giving to him the fruit, they beat these men who were sent, and they went away empty-handed, and then he sent another one. And the Lord is painting this picture of a nation that God had planted, had chosen, had longed to bear fruit in the world, but they hadn't listened. And when the prophets came, rather than turning, they beat them, they stoned one, they sent another away shamelessly, and they killed many others. And still the father, or the owner, if you will, of the vineyard was patient, and finally he said he would send his own beloved son. "They'll respect him." But the vinedressers, rather than respecting him, said in this parable, "This is the son. This is the heir. If we kill him, we'll get the inheritance." And Jesus said to these men, "What would you suspect the owner will do to these wicked vinedressers?" And they sought to lay hands upon Him because they feared, but they knew that He was speaking a parable against them. They hadn't responded. They hadn't listened. So, a week earlier, before the cross (Luke 13:34), Jesus had looked over the city in tears. He had said to the nation, "How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!" "And now there is waiting for you judgment." And He wept over what they would have to face in the days to come, how their children would be laid in the ground, how not one stone would be left upon another.

So, Jesus stops to speak to the ladies. He had come to save. To His nation first, His own nation first. The invitation is still out today. You can be right with God,

but you're going to have to come to the cross. I can only imagine what the next fifty years might hold for us if we don't turn to Jesus and if the Lord would tarry.

But He ended (there in Luke 23:30) by saying to them, "You're going to cry out to the mountains, 'Fall on us and cover us!' " Now that's a Scripture that has its roots in the Old Testament. Jesus obviously knew it very well. But in Hosea 10, Hosea the prophet was sent to the northern kingdom of Israel to warn them that their idolatry was going to bring God's judgment - they should repent, and they didn't - and eventually the Syrians would come in, in 722 B.C., and just annihilate the north. Hosea spoke in 740 B.C., eighteen years earlier. And he said, "There's coming a time when you're going to cry out to the mountains to hide you, to cover you," (Hosea 10:8) and Jesus says the same thing now, here, to the ladies as they stand along the roadside. Thirty-eight years from now, the horror and the invasion of the Romans would bring much the same type of suffering. But you'll find it one other time in your Bible - way back at the end, in Revelation 6 - when the sixth seal of God's judgment against the world is opened and the wrath of God is poured out upon unbelieving man, and He said of them, "They will cry out in that day to the mountains, 'Hide us' " - the judgment of God falling. Now here's God's promise to you and me - we're not going to be here (1 Thessalonians 5:9, Romans 5:9). Just remember 5:9. You'll be in a good place. Jesus encouraged us to pray to escape those things.

But the Lord ended by saying to the ladies (Luke 23:30), " 'If they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?' " And He refers to Himself. He's the life that they had seen. They'd seen Him open the eyes of the blind and preach the gospel to the poor, and He was fruitful. "But if they've treated Me like this, what's going to happen when I'm not here, when they have a dead, fruitless kind of religion that doesn't really lead anywhere?" "If God spared not His own Son who is innocent, how will the guilty escape?" (Romans 8:32) And so Jesus stops to speak to these "Daughters of Jerusalem."

Mark 15:22 tells us that they arrive, then, at the place Golgotha. The word means place of a skull. Skulls are usually emblematic of death. They show up in a lot of tattoos and gang emblems. The word is Hebrew for the Aramaic word for skull. The word Calvary is Latin for the Greek word for skull. So both of them really say the same thing. If you go to Israel today, Calvary's hill, which sits above a very busy bus station outside the Damascus Gate, is in a very public place. And for generations, just looking at this hill, you would see a skull. There are some caves

that have been there for generations. There is a lot of erosion and building around there. And some of that little nose part has kind of worn away over the years, but you can still certainly see it, and I think that's how it's gotten its name. It was very public. It's along the main road. It's outside the city gates. It's the place that everyone would see. And so that's where they brought Jesus. And down at the base of that hill is the place of the tomb, so Jesus could be taken not very far by Joseph to be buried.

Verse 23 tells us, "Then they" (these Roman soldiers) "gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it." Myrrh is an anesthetic. It was oftentimes used, in those days, for that purpose - to deaden the pain. It wasn't offered in mercy. There was no mercy with the Romans. It was offered so He wouldn't squirm while they drove these spikes through His hands and feet. But He wanted to be in His full capacity and faculty as He drank the cup of wrath of God against our sin. And so He refused it. There's this prophecy, Psalm 69:21, that says, "They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." He refused the anesthetic. He would take some vinegar at the end of the crucifixion process so He could clearly say, "It is finished!" He wanted everybody to hear that. But He wouldn't deaden the pain that He was suffering for us.

Verse 24, "And when they crucified Him, they divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take. Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him" (it was 9:00 a.m., third hour to the Jews). He would be on the cross, verse 33 of this chapter, "until the ninth hour," or until 3:00 in the afternoon - six hours in all. And, like I said, there is very little talk of the physical aspects of His suffering. It is all about the purpose of God in sending His Son. It is all about the fulfillment of prophecy so that you might realize that He's God and that He was intended to come; and it's all about the need of man, that he needs to have the blood of Jesus cleanse him from his sin. So it's the purpose, it's the prophecy, and it's the need of man.

On the cross, Jesus said three things between 9:00 a.m. and noon. At noon, everything goes dark. And for the next three hours, everything is dark throughout the land. At 3:00, or five minutes till, Jesus utters four more phrases - seven in all. But for those three hours, He says nothing in the darkness until He is ready to declare, "It is finished!" So there are three and four, really, sayings, if you will, upon the cross. The first words of Jesus upon the cross are uttered at the time of this crucifixion that Mark mentions here. "Father, forgive them. They don't

know what they do" (Luke 23:34). The second one - still before noon - was offered to a fellow that had been crucified with Him, had mocked Him, and somehow, in the difficult times, realized he was wrong, and he was the sinner, and Jesus was not. And he asked for mercy and was told, "Today, you'll be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Right before noon, it is Jesus who said to John, "Behold, your mother!" and to Mary, "Behold, your son!" (John 19:26). And it isn't until, like I said, almost 3:00 that the Lord speaks again - Jesus crying out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34) "I'm thirsty" (John 19:28). "It is finished!" (John 19:30) And, "Into Your hands, Father, I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46). But the first words, "Father, forgive them," I can't even begin to relate to how....I couldn't do this. Could you? These crooked, wicked men driving stakes in your hands, killing you for something you haven't done. You're absolutely innocent. Brutal, heartless. I read about these soldiers. I don't like them. I hate these guys! I want to punch them in the nose. Over the years, as a chaplain with the police department, we've been out on some pretty horrific kinds of accidents. But these are heartless guys that could do this. How do you do this? And then the Lord prays for them. "Father, just forgive them. They don't get what they're doing. They don't understand." And I think about Jesus' hands - these hands that laid on a fevered brow, and now this guy is driving a stake through them; on blind eyes and deaf ears that brought healing and mercy of God to bear, and now they're bruised and torn and punctured and swollen. Or His feet. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news" (Isaiah 52:7). And those feet that had been washed by that woman and her tears, there in the city of Nain; the ones that Mary, in Bethany, had anointed with some expensive perfume; the ones that had walked mile after mile after mile, hill upon hill, to bring good news to everyone that would hear it. It's ninety miles from the Sea of Galilee down to Jerusalem. Back and forth He went to preach the good news. And now they decide sticking a nail through them would be the right thing to do. Can you just imagine?

But rather than screaming out in pain, He prays. With what little breath He has left, He forgives. His hands are bound, His feet are tied, but His heart is not. I always think about - did the Father hear the prayers of His Son? Because, in the next forty years, while the church had some liberty to preach (just in the general area), thousands upon thousands of Romans, as well as Jews, get saved. I mean, the book of Acts is just all about reporting the fruit of that prayer, the forgiveness that God offers to the brutal. Even amongst the Sanhedrin, the priests were getting saved. Even among Caesar's staff, they were getting saved. Isaiah would write (53:11) about Jesus, "By His knowledge My righteous Servant

shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities." And "it pleased the LORD to bruise Him" (Isaiah 53:10) so that knowing Him could bring life. Jesus prayed for the people that I would want to kill. He blessed those who didn't deserve it, who outwardly stand as those that you would hate the most. But He practiced what He preached. Because if you're just preaching and have no corresponding practice, it's useless. He loves His enemies. He prays for those who persecute Him. So, yeah, His prayer was answered all right. Just read the book of Acts, and you just, "Yeah, the Father heard the prayers of His Son." Today in heaven, the Bible says, Jesus is at the right hand of the Father praying for you (Romans 8:34). It's pretty cool, isn't it? I like when you pray for me. I really like when He does. Right? We read, there in a couple of places, that the Lord is interceding for us. Hebrews 7:25, "He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them." And in Romans 8:34, "He is at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us." This morning, at the right hand of the Father, Jesus sits to bring your needs, your struggles, before the Father. And it amazes me to think that the Lord is praying for me. I suspect I'm making it because of that. I expect you are making it because of that. He helps us through it. "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." And I want to say of course they know what they're doing! They know they're killing a man. I think the implication was they weren't aware of who He was.

Sins of ignorance, in the Bible, by the way, still have to be forgiven, and you're still responsible for them. Numbers 15 says that ignorance is no excuse, and presumptuous sins or unintentional sins are still ones that have to be dealt with. Paul, when he wrote to Timothy, said, "Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man, I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief" (1 Timothy 1:13). "I just didn't know any better." Peter preached, in chapter 3:17 of Acts, "I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers." So Paul said (in Acts 17:30), "These times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent." So, "Father, forgive them." Sinners need a Savior.

Verse 24, "And when they crucified Him, they divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take. Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him. And the inscription of His accusation was written above: THE KING OF THE JEWS." One of the humiliations of being crucified was that you were hung in public, naked. The soldiers had finished their dreadful deed. They had heard Jesus' prayer of forgiveness escape His lips. They now turned to more

selfish interests - the spoils; prisoners' clothes, part of their pay - four soldiers, two pieces of clothing. We read that the outer cloak that Jesus wore was quickly torn in four pieces (John 19:23). But, according to the other gospels, this inner tunic that He wore was one piece which meant it was handmade. It was valuable, it was expensive, it was maybe made by His mom or a friend. And they didn't want to tear it up, so they said, "Let's gamble for it, let's cast the dice, let's see who wins, and the winner can take all." And there, at the foot of the cross, John tells us (in chapter 19:24) that they did these things to fulfill the Scriptural testimony (Psalm 22:18) written a thousand years earlier by David, "They cast lots for My clothing." Just in case you missed Jesus being the One, He's the One for whom they cast lots. So, I don't know who the winner was. I thought about - what did they carry away from Calvary that day? Some got a piece of cloth, a quarter of somebody's jacket. One guy carried away an expensive, though greatly bloodied, inner tunic. But they didn't walk away with life. They didn't walk away with repentance. Their lives had not been changed. They met Jesus. They didn't recognize Him as such. And at least, for most of them, they were able to weather the experience; except, at least, for one soldier. Luke 23:47 says one of the guys standing nearby when Jesus died recognized that this was, indeed, the Son of God.

So what do you take home when you sit and consider the cross? It all depends, I guess, on what you believe and what you're seeing and what you're hearing.

Pilate, of all of the times that he puts his foot down, decided that the sign should say, "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS." John 19:21 tells us that even as they were making the sign up, the religious guys were there arguing, "No, no. Put that He said He was." And Pilate said, "I'm not changing the sign." And the declaration was in the positive form. Pilate shows backbone for the first time - way too little, way too late. And so the inscription that Matthew (27:37) tells us, the full reading of it, "THIS IS JESUS NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS."

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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