

All right. Let's open our Bibles this morning to Mark 15:27 as we continue with Mark. I'll be reading a lot this morning out of Luke 23 as well. They're the same verses, if you will; just give us a little bit more information than Mark does. So you can look there and listen as I go.

But Mark 15:27 is where we're going to start, where we read these words, "With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left. So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And He was numbered with the transgressors.' And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!' Likewise the chief priests also, mocking among themselves with the scribes, said, 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe.' Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him."

I'm pretty sure - from all that I read in the Scriptures - that one of the things that God would have you never to get tired of is the story of the cross. I mean, your Bible points to it. It is the place where man finds life. And aside from His second coming, it is the first and most important issue that the Old Testament just points forward to. In fact, both of the sacraments that the church has - baptism and communion - are designed to remind you of the cross. Paul would write (in Romans 6:3) to the Romans about baptism, "Don't you know that if you've been baptized into Christ you've been baptized into His death? So that being buried with Him through baptism into death, you might in Jesus then be raised from the dead to the glory of the Father to live a new life or to walk in newness of life." Paul, writing to the Corinthians, said about communion that the Lord taught them that you should take and eat the body which was broken for you in remembrance of Him (1 Corinthians 11:24); the same thing with the cup, " 'Do it in remembrance of Me.' " He finally said, "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you show forth or proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Unfortunately, whenever something becomes familiar it is easily treated with contempt. You know, "I've heard it 100 times." But there has to be something in our hearts and in our practices that allows the memory of what Jesus was willing to

pay for us to be on the conscious level of our lives in terms of being in touch with how much He was willing to pay. It's a lot, isn't it, for us? Look around. This is who He did it for - us. I remember, years ago, hearing a lady give a testimony at a funeral for her husband, who had passed away. He was an older guy. But she recounted a story about how they grew up on a Kentucky farm, and they lived on a dirt road, and there really was no one that ever came up and down the roads there, and so her kids always played outside - didn't really worry about it. No one went through that area except for one day, a young man, driving a car way too fast - not looking, came barreling down the road, and he hit their 9-year-old boy on a bike and killed him. And the dad went to the funeral, and he took this mangled bike, and he laid it in the barn. But she recounted that every day, from that day forward, when he'd go into the barn to get his stuff to go to work, he'd weep. And she said, "I told him to throw the bike away." He said, "No." Ten years later, he was still in tears. And somehow that has to be, I think, the connection that you have with the cross. Never forget how much God has done and what He was willing to pay and what kind of account He opened on your behalf. That should always be fresh to you. It's fresh with communion, it's fresh with baptism.

In Genesis 22, where we have that relatable story of Abraham, who's asked to take his son, Isaac, to sacrifice him, the LORD says to Abraham, " 'Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love.' " And it's the first time you read the word "love" in the Old Testament. It was the love of a father for his only begotten son, and you can relate to what he had to go through as he took his boy three days' journey to that place that God would show him. In the New Testament, if you're looking for the word "love," you'll find it in Matthew 3:17 where the LORD points to His Son and says, " 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' " And so the cross' account not only fills the pages of the gospels, but it is constantly brought up, and it needs to keep a place in your life. Go sit there often. That's what I would say to you.

This morning we want to take a look at what the Bible has to tell us about the first three hours that Jesus spent on the cross. We had looked, last week, at His forgiveness prayer for the soldiers who were crucifying Him. In fact, it's one of three (kind of) sentences that Jesus will utter before noon. There'll be four others that will follow. But we told you, I think, last week that there is very little reporting of the physical suffering of Jesus when it comes to Calvary. That comes, more often than not, outside the Bible. What there is a lot of (in the Scriptures) is that the cross was a fulfillment of prophecy, which meant that God knew and

that Jesus is God who came to save (it was His idea) and the constant application that we need Him to save us, that a Savior came because man needs to be saved. And you will find that constantly.

This morning, as we just look at a few of these verses (all taking place before noon), there is a great emphasis in the Bible on the mockery that took place standing around the cross as Jesus hung. Then the Lord was able to deal with a repentant thief and bring His mother some care. But the emphasis is mostly that upon the reaction of the crowds standing by. Over in Luke 23:35 (and it goes along with what we read here), it says, "And the people stood looking on." I can't imagine that anyone would want to stand "looking on." I know that when there's an accident, the traffic slows because everyone wants to see what it is. But if you see too much, you kind of like to drive away. And especially for crucifixion, crucifixion deaths were very slow. You would die in three or four days. You always died, unless you bled to death, of being suffocated. Because of the pull on your arms, you're not able to get your body up to exhale, which is why that, in mercy, sometimes the legs of the people being crucified would be broken, thereby hurrying it up. They didn't have any strength; now they have no bones to stand upon. And that's (you remember) what happened this time as they came to break the legs of these thieves that were crucified with Jesus - found He was already dead, He was finished. Very unusual. It surprised Pilate and everyone else. But death by suffocation over a period of time is horrible. And the crowds stood by. They were watching. They were caught up. Some of the crowd mocked, some wept, many seemed to be indifferent. We read (there in Mark 15:29) that there were "those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!' " And you can just get this picture of our Lord paying the price for the sins of the world - including those who are mocking Him - and now having to deal with this very fickle crowd. And this was a crowd that, just seven days earlier, had sung, "Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD' " (Mark 11:9). You should know that this crowd had come to Jerusalem to worship God. They had come for the Passover. They had come to thank the LORD for getting them out of Egypt, and now they were on this wicked kind of bent here at Calvary. Now, it doesn't surprise the Lord. If you read Psalm 22, it was written about 1000 B.C. The psalmist writes (verse 7), "All those who see Me ridicule Me; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, 'He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!' " And there was

this mockery that went on constantly - challenging Jesus from the crowd, from the position of the crowds.

We are told, in verse 35 (the second portion, in Luke 23), "But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, 'He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God.' " So not only were the crowds, in general, vicious in their criticism of Jesus, but notice verse 31 in our text (Mark 15), "Likewise the chief priests" (now there should only be one priest, but this was a corrupt system - there were many) "also, mocking among themselves with the scribes." Matthew 27:43 adds that they yelled up at Him, "Let's see 'if God will have Him,' " kind of like, "I think You've run out of opportunity here. I think You've crossed the line." They had plenty of proof. And these were religious leaders - they should have known better. They had the Scriptures. They were the chosen nation. God had revealed Himself to them. But their taunts show that they had very little understanding of the Scriptures. They were upset that He had claimed to be God. They were glad that their plans had finally worked out. He was going to be killed, He was going to be out of their hair for good, or so they thought. With sarcasm they speak to Him, though they had plenty of reason to believe in Him. They saw it. The religious leaders, who set the religious tone for the nation, had never considered that the Messiah should die. Even today, if you go to Israel, and you say to religious Jews, "What about Isaiah 53, what about Psalm 22?" they will almost invariably spiritualize the text and not say it is a reference to the Messiah but rather that it is a reference to their suffering as God's people in the world. There's just a setting aside, a negating, of the clear testimony of Scripture that man needs a Savior. It's one of those classic cases of just hearing what you want to hear. Jesus took it all; didn't say a word all of these hours. I'm glad that He didn't respond. Had He come off the cross, we would have been in trouble. But He didn't. Their implication that the Father doesn't care for Him, that He'd gone too far, that, "Let's see if You're really the deal, are You really the Son of God," sounds a lot to me like the enemy when he comes into our lives, and he challenges God's love for us. Right? "God has abandoned you. God doesn't really love you. You're the only person in the world He despises." The lies of the enemy in the mouths of these religious leaders.

We are told in Luke 23:36-37, "The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, and saying, 'If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself.' " The crowds were moved by the crowds. The religious leaders were moved by their ideas of how the Messiah should be and how He threatened their position. The

Roman soldiers came to mock because they were in charge. Their motivation was not spiritual. Their motivation was, "We're the boss. We're the conquerors." In fact they used the words (in Luke 23:37), " 'If You're the King,' guess who's ruling? We are. You're not. You're a dead King. Come on, King of the Jews." And they turned against Him in their position of authority.

So in every way - from every place - mockery and threats were directed at Jesus. Not one word is spoken by Him in His defense. He came to suffer on our behalf. He endured, though He despised the shame (Hebrews 12:2). Peter said (1 Peter 2:23), "When He was reviled, He did not revile in return," or, literally, He didn't give it back to them the way they were giving it to Him, that, "when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree,by whose stripes you were healed." So, you see our Lord in the midst of a crowd of very wicked and vocal folks who all kind of come against Him for different reasons. Public opinion - that's easy to get caught up in. You want to be in the midst of the crowd. You want to be in the majority. The crowd's always somewhere, usually in the wrong place, but if that's where you want to be, it's an easy place to hide. And the people, I think they're made worse by the fact that there're so many of them. The religious people sneer because they think they know better. Their spirituality and their pride is such that Jesus is now put in His place, this upstart. And then there's the world in power around you that will always mock your faith - from a position of power. Right? How long have we been told you can't pray in school? Position of power. I doubt that's stopping anyone from praying, especially on test day.

Finally we are told (not by Mark but by Luke) that there were two who were crucified with Him, and they "blasphemed Him, saying, 'If You are the Christ, the Promised One, the Messiah, save Yourself and us' " (Luke 23:39). And finally the mockery comes from those who are dying with Him, there on the cross - one on His left, one on His right. They join the ranks of the mockers. Mockery, hatred, unbelief, challenging; religious people, soldiers, the crowds, the criminals. Everyone turned against the Lord, the Messiah, the One who had come to save. "If You're really the Messiah, save us. We'll believe in You. Come on off the cross."

It's interesting. If you go back to Luke 4, where Jesus is starting His earthly ministry, He is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil for nearly six weeks. But one of the temptations that Satan threw at Jesus was, "If You want to avoid the cross, let me show You the kingdoms of the world, and I'll

give them all to You. You want worship? You want people to follow You? I'll give them all to You if You'll just bow down and worship me." And a suggestion was that the cross could be set aside and that Jesus, without pain and difficulty, could have what He was coming for. Now, we don't see Jesus arguing with the devil that He had access to those things. When man fell, that title deed passed along to the enemy that they'd listened to; only Jesus came to purchase us back. But Jesus does rebuke the devil because He said His Word was a plan to save. Forgiveness could be found only when someone was able to die, if you will. Forgiveness comes through the sacrifice that Jesus had come to bring. So, the devil's plan was just get rid of the cross. When Peter (in Matthew 16) was shown by the Lord in a revelation (as Jesus will tell Peter) about who He was when He asked, " 'Who do men say that I am?' " Peter said " 'You're the Messiah, the Son of the living God, the Promised One.' " And Jesus said, " 'You didn't get that from man. You got that from My Father in heaven.' " It wasn't ten minutes later that, as Jesus began to tell them about the fact He was going to die (in fact, He told them for the first time a year before the cross), it is Peter who stands up and goes, "I think I got another message from heaven. You're not going to die!" And Jesus puts Peter in his place, says to him, "Get behind Me, Satan! You're now carrying forward the desires and the will of man, of the enemy, not of God." There is always this thing from the devil that he wants to have the cross set aside - which is why it's so important we keep it in view - to tell people they don't need Jesus, they don't need someone dying for their sins, that they're good enough to do things on their own if they can just make out a good resume of their accomplishments, that they can try their hardest, if they can do their best, if they'll live up to their expectations to the point that they can, that'll be enough. It's not enough! Because the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). But the idea of avoiding the cross comes from the pit of hell. Jesus said that to Peter as well. To this day, that's always what Satan wants to offer to people - you can come to God without the cross. Look what the mocker says, "Come off the cross. Are You really the One? Come down from the cross. Deliver Yourself from the cross. Show us who You are. Get down!" The crowd is fickle. They change their opinion often. Religious folks, if they're driven by lies, are brutal and not very open to the truth. Soldiers, like men in position and power, always think that their strength is something they can stand behind. And, look, the thieves thought, "You're in the same predicament we are! How are You going to help us?" Yet everyone has to decide - with what they know - why He died and why He came.

Luke 23:40 tells us that about noon, or just before noon, one of the thieves had a change of heart. In fact, he speaks up, and he says to his buddy (who is still rebuking the Lord), " 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we are indeed justly,' " (being killed, if you will) " 'for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.' " And then he turns to Jesus and says, " 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' " And it gave Jesus the opportunity to say His second line (before noon, from the cross). He said, " 'Today you will be with Me in Paradise.' " It was no mistake, if you will, that the Lord was crucified amongst these folks. Notice that Mark goes out of his way to tell us so. He quotes Isaiah 53:12. He said in verse 28 (of Mark 15), that it might be fulfilled what the Scriptures had spoken. It's an interesting picture, though, isn't it? You have Jesus, the Savior who was promised, in the middle; and on either side of Him - equidistant away from Him - two very sinful men being killed for their way of life. And one of them, by the end of this day, turns out much better, and the other one dies bitter. The difference was their view of Jesus. They both saw what the others saw. They both experienced what the Lord had said. They both watched Him. They had heard about His goodness, certainly. They knew about their own sinfulness. And yet they go through identical situations and end up in a different place. It reminds me of church. Same row - one's going to heaven, one's not; hearing the same message week after week.

A couple of things I think that you should look at that picture with Jesus and these two thieves. For one thing, the thief gives you yet another testimony to Jesus' innocence. It's everywhere through the story - from Pilate to his wife to the soldier. It doesn't matter where you turn. He's innocent. Number two - it is a wonderful proof to us that salvation is not by works. I mean, look at this fellow to whom Jesus said, "Today you'll be with Me in Paradise." He literally didn't have any time to be baptized. Unfortunate guy. No time to take communion. No time to walk down the aisle. Oh, he was raising his hand at the altar call, but it was put there in place. He never wrote a tithe check. He didn't join a denomination. He just asked for mercy. And he was given great assurance, "You'll have it. You have it. Today you'll be with Me in Paradise." Salvation does not come by works. It isn't a ritual. It isn't a sacrament, if you will. It's God's free gift. Today. I think that the thief on the cross' salvation - which Jesus promised him - tells you, indeed, that it isn't a reward that is given, but it is a gift that is passed along. Do you remember when that centurion came to Jesus in Capernaum for a sick servant (Matthew 8, Luke 7), and the Lord said, "Well, I'll just come and heal him"? And

the centurion made a great argument. He said to the Lord, "I know all about authority. I'm kind of a big shot in town. I've got a lot of people I can order around that'll do exactly what I say." And then he said to Jesus, "So I know that You can just say, 'Be healed.' I know where Your authority extends. You're God." That was his confession. "You're over everything. So You don't have to come to my house. But if You could just say that he's healed, that'll be enough. I know it'll be fine." And Jesus was blown away! He said, "I've not seen this kind of faith in all of Israel!"

The question that you obviously ask yourself when you read through the account of this turn of events in this man's life is - what changed? What happened to him that he would, so quickly now, change his mind or his opinion or his outlook? And I think there're a couple of things that we should consider. And maybe the most important one is God works in the heart where we don't see anything. We preach, we share, we pray, we tell folks what God has done in our life. But what goes on internally is not something that we see. We see the result of. But we really can't quantify it on the outside. Certainly God the Holy Spirit was at work in this man's heart - that the sign over Jesus' head (which said He was the King of the Jews) may have been put there as mockery or in defiance by Pilate, but it meant truth to the fellow that was hanging there, dying. When those two disciples on the way to Emmaus, on the afternoon of the resurrection, ran into Jesus, and He hid Himself from them, and He asked them why they were so sad, they began to explain. And one of the things they said was, "We had hoped that this Jesus would be the One, but He's dead." And they saw the cross as kind of the end of their hope. But here's a guy being crucified with Jesus that sees the cross as the beginning of his hope, and he asks the Lord for mercy. He doesn't make a case for himself or how sorry he might have been. But he realizes he's sinful, and I think even his testimony himself will show you how you get saved. You acknowledge your sinfulness before God, and call upon Jesus to save you. That's what he did. "We're suffering, and we deserve it! He hasn't done anything wrong. He's the Lord. He's the One I need. Lord, remember me." God is at work. Only the Holy Spirit can produce the kind of insight that transcends visible information (of which there would have been little) or even maybe some negative kind of evidence to the contrary. It didn't look like Jesus was much of a King, at least not outwardly. But in his heart, he certainly recognized Him as such.

Well Jesus, like I said, never once in His trial spoke out in His own defense, never sought to rebuke an ugly lie, never sought to set the record straight, didn't get in

the face of these sinners who were screaming at Him from below His feet. But I love this. When one voice is heard, "Lord, help me," He immediately speaks up. He doesn't hesitate. He immediately responds, strengthening this man's hope, assuring him of his salvation and of his future. No matter what he had done, no matter how far he had gone, no matter how much he deserved the death penalty, Jesus offers no word of rebuke to this man, whatsoever; only an assurance - because of his confession - of what the future would hold. That's how God saves. Isn't that as good as it gets? I mean, He doesn't bring up his failures; He brings up his victory. That's how God loves you and me. That's how God meets every sinner and everyone that you would share with. I think, from a biblical standpoint (as far as a viewpoint), that this sinful thief was, for Jesus, a taste of joy before the bitter cup that was about to be drunk. At noon the lights would go out. The Father would turn from His Son. There wouldn't be any response. He would have the sins of the world poured out upon Him. For three hours, there would just be nothing, as Jesus agonized, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?" But before that happened, I think the Father gave His Son a taste of what the fruit would be of His sacrifice. Here was a guy already crying out for help, a man unbelievably shaken by his own failures, looking to Jesus with great hope. So, before that time of suffering, of separation, Jesus, I think, is encouraged at what the fruit of His shame and of His death would bring - the salvation of many. And may I say to you that the thief on the cross should convince you that, until your dying breath, God will save. Now I'm not suggesting you wait that long because you may not know when your last breath is and not use it properly. In fact, there are very few deathbed conversions in the Bible. There are enough to assure you that you still have hope. There are few enough to convince you not to wait so long. That's why the Bible says, "Today is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2). God's speaking to you. Let Him in. I mean, an hour before, this criminal had cursed Jesus loudly and joined the mockery. And now, at the end, he doesn't do that at all. He cries for mercy, and he immediately finds Jesus saying so. Pretty good, don't you think? Nice to be loved like this.

Well, one other thing Jesus said towards 12:00, right before the place got really dark and that judgment for our sins was placed upon His shoulders; and that is that the Lord looked down upon the crowd, and John writes about it in three verses in John 19. And He looks down, and He sees Mary (His mother), He sees His mother's sister, He sees Mary (the wife of Cleopas), He sees Mary Magdalene, He sees John. These faithful women - we'll run into them in a couple of weeks - are the last ones at the cross, they're the first ones at the tomb, they're the first ones there on resurrection morning, and they're the first ones rewarded with seeing the Lord.

These women were faithful. John was there as well. And John tells us that Jesus looked at His mother and then looked at John, the disciple that He loved, and He said, "Woman, behold your son!" And then He said to John, "Behold your mother!" He didn't call Mary His mother. That was about to change in relationship. He calls her "woman." Now, if you call your wife, "Hey, woman," today, you're not going to do well. This is not going to work out very well. But at least in the culture of the 1st century, that was a very respectful title and not offensive at all. So, that takes us up to noon - three hours into that time of six hours.

But I want you to think about the responses because there're a lot of them, aren't there? The crowds, the religious leaders, the Roman soldiers, thief one, thief two. And, even in His death, we learn from the Lord the need that we have to respond. You can seek to save yourself, or you can wisely look at Jesus to save you. You can be moved by the crowds (plenty of people are), or you can be moved by the cross. You can be headed for judgment or headed for Paradise. It really is up to you. On that first day of our salvation - when the Lord paid the price - you have one of everything standing around. Still true today. But life is had for those who recognize His love and respond to it. That's all.

Next week, we'll pick up at noon with our Lord.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
July 5, 2017