

Text – Mark 15:16-32

16 Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called [c]Praetorium, and they called together the whole garrison. 17 And they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of thorns, put it on His head, 18 and began to salute Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 19 Then they struck Him on the head with a reed and spat on Him; and bowing the knee, they worshiped Him. 20 And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him.

21 Then 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. 22 And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull. 23 Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it. 24 And when they crucified Him, they divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take.

25 Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him. 26 And the inscription of His accusation was written above:

THE KING OF THE JEWS.

27 With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left. 28 So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And He was numbered with the transgressors."

29 And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30 save Yourself, and come down from the cross!"

31 Likewise the chief priests also, mocking among themselves with the scribes, said, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. 32 Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and [f]believe."

Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him.

Let us pray...

Introduction

Background

This passage begins right in the middle of a series of dramatic events which led to Jesus being in the position he is in. Before we start our study of this specific text, let's remind ourselves what happened over the last 24 hours which lead to this brutal and unjust treatment of Jesus.

Less than 24 hours before, Jesus was sharing the yearly Passover meal with his disciples. This was a traditional celebration, a feast of sorts. After the meal Jesus and his disciples went to a garden, and it is here that the anguish begins for Jesus. He knows what is going to happen, He knows the ordeal he is about to face, but He is also very aware that the ordeal he is about to face is the very reason He is on earth. But He has a choice. A choice to obey or disobey. He can choose to obey his father and face the pain or he can choose the painless way but disobey his father. Jesus is tempted to choose the easier way and he wrestles with what he has to do. In his distress He prays to his father. He prays for another way, for the cup to pass him by, but he finishes his trial of temptation with a powerful statement: "Yet not what I will, but what you will". He chooses to obey his father despite the pain, the torment, the shame and the suffering.

Not long after Jesus finishes praying Judas, one of the twelve, betrays him by leading the religious leaders with soldiers to the garden where Jesus was. Jesus does not try to hide or run, He gives himself up freely. The soldiers arrest Him and his disciples all flee in fear.

Jesus is betrayed by someone close to him, arrested by people he could destroy with a flick of his fingers and abandoned by the ones who had pledged allegiance to him.

From that point, Jesus is then put on trial six different times. Each trial more corrupt and an insult to justice than the next. He is led before Annas, before Caiaphas, before the Sanhedrian, before the Roman governor, Pilate, before Herod and finally again before Pilate where he is condemned to death, death by Crucifixion. He is condemned by Pilate who knows that this is not justice, but he is too concerned about his political career and is manipulated by the angry mob. The power is no longer in the hands of the government, it is in the hands of the mob, and the mob is crying for blood, for the blood of Jesus and so Pilate fulfills the wishes of the mob and sentences Jesus to be Crucified.

As per standard practice for a man condemned to Crucifixion, Jesus is scourged. He is severely beaten with a specialized whip. His back and shoulders are ripped to shreds. The lacerations go deep as flesh is ripped off his back and bone and ligaments are exposed. When the soldiers finally stop scourging Jesus, he would have been in a state of shock, wrecked by pain, weakened by loss of blood and surrounded by people who regard Him as a criminal.

Hook

This is where our passage picks up the story line, but before we dive into the study, let us ask a question for the sake of understanding the big picture of this situation. Why is Jesus choosing to do this? Why is he being tortured and being led to execution, when he clearly has the power to deliver himself anytime he wants?

(Appendix 1)

In summary, He is doing it for two reasons: for the sake of justice and for love towards us. For justice, because, by right our sins deserve punishment. And For love, because Jesus is choosing to take this punishment on our behalf so that we do not perish.

This display of love while maintaining justice comes at a great cost to God, so as we continue studying this passage let's remember: Why is Jesus going through this ordeal? Because of love and because of justice.

And so, with this in mind, back to our story line:

Jesus is abandoned by those who were loyal to him, denied justice by all officials, in physical pain that our imaginations cannot begin to grasp, and yet his ordeal has only began.

For the sake of fully appreciating the passage we will divide it by following the geographic location of Jesus in the narrative. First, Jesus is at the Praetorium (the guard house), then Jesus is on the road, and finally we see Jesus at Golgotha.

1 - Jesus at the Praetorium (v16 -20)

Exposition

And so, let us take a closer look when Jesus is in the Praetorium, in the custody of the Roman soldiers. Picking up in verse 16,

16 Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called [c]Praetorium, and they called together the whole garrison. 17 And they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of thorns, put it on His head, 18 and began to salute Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 19 Then they struck Him on the head with a reed and spat on Him; and bowing the knee, they worshiped Him. 20 And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him.

The soldiers have just finished scourging Jesus, the next official task was to lock Jesus back in a cell and start preparing who and what they needed for the execution. But for the soldiers, it seemed not enough that they beaten Jesus to inches of His life and that he was about to be executed. They had no particular connection with Jesus, they had no doubt heard of him, but they had no personal reason to want to inflict extra torment on Him. They just wanted to have a bit more fun. A bit of entertainment to break up their day. But really it is an excuse to satisfy their sadistic desire. And so they called all of their mates who were still in the barracks and set up their little game. They found an old cloak laying around, so bleached in the sun that the red dye had faded to purple, ideal they thought to reflect royal purple. This old cloak they wrapped around Jesus' shoulders, onto his slashed and bloodied back. Of course a king needs a crown, and what better for a mock king, than a crown of thorns, they thought.

Jesus would have been unaware that they were weaving a crown of thorns, standing or sitting in the middle of a crown of blood thirsty men, trying to manage the pain and focus on not passing out, the surprise and agony when someone dropped and set in place the ring of thorn on to his head, would have been excruciating. Some of the thorns cutting the skin, others being driven straight into his scalp, hitting nerve and bone.

Now that the soldiers had organized the costume, topped off with a reed as a scepter, their game could begin. Imagine a crowd of rowdy soldiers, egging each other on as they take turns playing out a little charade in front of Jesus. Bowing a knee, only to stand up and spit on Jesus, Mock words of worship only to be turned into a taunt, pretending to help Jesus hold his "scepter" only to use it to strike Jesus on the head with it, driving the ring of thorns deeper into Jesus' scalp. Quoting the very title which in their mind had condemned Him "King of the Jews", and using it in mock adoration. You can imagine the charades getting more barbaric and brutal as the soldiers bounce ideas off each other on how to humiliate and inflict pain in new and elaborate ways. We don't know how long this lasted for, but even

if half the garrison was present, 300 men would want to have their turn in this cruel and sadistic game.

Application

What a raw and clear picture of man's depraved and darkened heart. Fully left to their own device, for Pilate did not order this, nor did he stop this behaviour, we can see what humans separated from God are capable of, given the chance. And tragically this unleashed depravity is not an uncommon occurrence in history as we see dark tragedies in the past and today.

Even in ourselves, we see this depravity come out from the remaining presence of sin. We see our desires of the flesh come out when we are tired, upset, scared or hungry. Words and actions which we would be appalled by in a more controlled state are expressed instinctively. We give excuses because of our lack of sleep, or whatever it may be, but in reality it is a response of our depraved and darkened hearts. Fully left to ourselves would we be different from these soldiers? Some aspects of society help contain our fleshly desires nature, but the only true solution to our darkened, depraved soul is trusting that Jesus suffered and died to cleanse us from sin and our sinful nature.

And so we must realize that Jesus is taking this physical and mental torture, for the sake of these soldiers, for these men who are mocking, and beating and spitting in his face. For them and all others who have spat in his face throughout history. He is doing it for them, to save them, because He, Jesus, the one who is being beaten and mocked does not want those who are beating him and mocking him to perish, but wants them to have everlasting life. We know that Jesus is not bitter or angry against his tormentors, despite defying our understanding. We know this because mere hours later, after further pain and torment he says this: "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do*"

Jesus is allowing himself to be tormented in order to save his tormentors. It puts a different light on passages like 2 Peter 3:9

*The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is long suffering toward us, not willing that **any** should perish but that **all** should come to repentance.*

"All" includes the soldiers beating him and it includes you and me. He is not willing that any should perish.

(Appendix 2)

The soldiers finally grow tired of their game, they rip off the cloak which would have stuck to the dried blood and open flesh on Jesus' back, and lead Him off to be crucified.

Picking up in verse 21 we follow Jesus on the road to his execution:

2 - Jesus on the Road

Exposition

21 Then 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. 22 And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull. 23 Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it. 24 And when they crucified Him, they divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take.

Jesus is weakened physically, deprived from sleep and suffering from pain and loss of blood, and the Romans load the heavy horizontal beam of the cross, onto Jesus' shoulders and set off through the street towards the place of execution. There are some incredible things humans can do with pure grit, determination and will power, but there is a place where the body physically cannot go on. This is where Jesus was at. We cannot think that Jesus just gave up and asked for help. He would have given it his all, pushed on with all his strength, but finally his body gave up. Here we again see the humanity of Jesus. He was facing this trial in a way any other human would have to, no super-human strength or defiance of gravity. He was a man being led to be crucified. Jesus came to a point where he could not get himself back up and the Romans had to find someone from the crowd to carry the cross-beam for them or their prisoner would die before they could execute him.

Out of pure randomness they choose a man called Simon from Cyrene, a city in north Africa. There was a large Jewish community in Cyrene and no doubt he was in Jerusalem for the Passover. The way Mark makes reference to Simon as *the father of Alexander and Rufus*, indicates that his roman listeners knew who this was, this is further supported when we read in Romans 16:13 the uncommon name Rufus listed among those helping the church. It is not too much of a stretch to assumed that Simon and his family eventually became followers of Christ. And we can learn something from this small side story. When things are going wrong in our lives, when our plans do not play out as we had hoped, just like Simon being forced to do a criminals task in the middle of his holiday, we have to rely on God and his sovereignty. That unpleasant event changed Simon's life, in fact it bought him eternal

life. We too can have confidence that when hardships come, they are part of a plan even if we do not understand it.

Finally the procession makes it to the place of execution outside the city. A location known as the Place of the skull, Golgotha, translated in Latin as Calvaria. This was the usual place of execution, where the stench of death lingered in the air and the cries of the dying were common.

23 Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it.

The wine mingled with myrrh was meant to dull the pain of the recipient. But we cannot think that the Romans gave Jesus this painkiller out of compassion or consideration for Him. They gave Jesus, and the other condemned men, the drink simply to make their task of crucifying them easier. But Jesus did not take the drink. He did not want his mind dulled while he fulfilled his ultimate purpose on earth. He wanted to be fully conscious, fully aware as he bore the sins of the world, as he took the punishment for your sins and mine.

Which brings us to the final point of the journey.

3 - Jesus on the Cross

Read with me verses 25 to 32:

25 Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him. 26 And the inscription of His accusation was written above:

THE KING OF THE JEWS.

27 With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left. 28 So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And He was numbered with the transgressors."

29 And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30 save Yourself, and come down from the cross!"

31 Likewise the chief priests also, mocking among themselves with the scribes, said, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. 32 Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and [f]believe."

Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him.

Exposition - Narrative

The statement in verse 25 is so matter of fact that it is easy to lose its weight. Take a close look at verse 25:

Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him.

Mark does not elaborate on this, because his readers knew very well what execution by crucifixion looked like and the horror associated, but we cannot say the same for ourselves. Cicero, a Roman writer described it as “the cruellest and most hideous punishment possible”. Crucifixion was designed to inflict as much pain and suffering as possible while delaying as long as possible inevitable death.

After refusing the drink, Jesus was forced to lie on his back on the cross constructed by the Romans from the beam Jesus and Simon had carried to this place. As He lay there the rough wood stabbed into his lacerated back, and soldiers proceeded to driving large steel nails through Jesus’ wrists and securing them into the crossbeam behind. Next was the feet. One nail through both feet and positioned such so that Jesus’ knees were bent, which would allow him, at times, to take his weight off his arms and shoulders. The soldiers, satisfied that their victim was secure, proceeded to raise the cross until it was vertical. There was a post hole ready, such that when the cross was vertical it dropped into place, and came to a sudden and jarring stop. The shock wave of pain as Jesus caught his dropping weight on his bones and nerves in his pierced wrists and feet is excruciating. And so the ordeal begins.

Crucifixion is such that the agony from the wounds is only one element of the pain. Hanging from his arms outstretched Jesus’ diaphragm is constricted and it is impossible for him to breathe while hanging. Every time He wants to take a breath, Jesus must push himself up from his feet and wrists, scraping his torn back on the cross, pulling down on the wounds in his wrists and feet and straining his exhausted muscles. Every breath. Every breath self inflicted agony for the sake of staying alive. Every breath a little harder to take than the previous, as his muscles become more and more tired. Every breath torture. (*breath in, breath out*)

Exposition - Behind the scene of the Narrative

We get a glimpse here of the physical and mental suffering Jesus went through as he is abandoned, mocked and crucified. A suffering some many empathize with and most of us can at least sympathize with. But the physical pain is only one aspect of Jesus’ suffering. The suffering goes deeper and broader than pain of the body. Jesus is tormented to his very soul.

The one who hates sin, who is perfect and holy is accepting sin upon himself. He is bearing the responsibility of sin and feeling that horrible feeling of guilt and shame that comes with sinning against the Holy God. He feels the anguish, the weight of guilt and the horrible sense of separation inflicted by sin which causes a deep revulsion in the center of his being. The fact that our sins were put on Jesus is reiterated again and again in the Bible. From illustrations and types such as the original Passover and the Mosaic sacrificial system to direct, explicit and clear passages of scripture in the old and new testament. In Isaiah 53 verse 6 we read both of the sin of humanity and how it was laid on Christ.

*6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the Lord has laid on Him (that is Jesus) the iniquity of us all.*

And further on in the same chapter, verse 12

*Therefore I will divide Him (Talking of Christ) a portion with the great,
And He shall divide the spoil with the strong,
Because He poured out His soul unto death,
And He was numbered with the transgressors,
And He bore the sin of many,
And made intercession for the transgressors.*

In 1 Peter 2:24

who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.

And 2 Corinthians 5:21

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

The scripture is clear: God thought of our sins as belonging to Christ. Not in the sense that God thought that Christ had committed the sins or that Jesus had a sinful nature, But in the sense that the guilt of our sins, the obligation of punishment was thought of by God as belonging to Christ instead of for us. Jesus chose to do this. He chose to take the responsibility for your sins and mine, feel the weight of them and pay the price. And what a high price it is.

Jesus is suffering in his body from outward wounds and in his soul from carrying the sins of his people. And added to this he is about to be abandoned by his heavenly Father and feels the full wrath of God Himself. Christ's suffering is utter and complete.

Exposition - Narrative

As Mark continues his narrative, he zooms out from the Jesus hanging on the cross, and we see that Jesus is not alone to be crucified. To his right and to his left is a robber also serving the death penalty in the same way. This is a big deal. In the culture of the day, the honour or shame imparted by association with others was huge. We see this by the judgement Jesus received when he eats with tax collectors and prostitutes. And of course the more important the task undertaken the more shame or honour was imparted. For Jesus to have been crucified alone would have been dishonourable, but He is crucified alongside criminals and counted as one of them, thus adding all possible shame at the death of an innocent man.

And once again we see God's sovereign hand at work. This is part of the plan. This is exact fulfillment of God's word: *"And He was numbered with the transgressors."* From Isaiah 53:12.

We take another step back from the scene and we see that there is a crowd gathered around Jesus and the two criminals. A crowd made up of chief priests, scribes, spectators and some of the general population passing by. And these all chip in and hurl insults at Jesus.

Those who pass by blaspheme him. They show defiant irreverence to the very son of God. "Aha" they say in glee and scorn and with a sense of victory. They would have heard so much about this man Jesus, and here he was nailed to a cross. At this point they must have thought he was a charlatan found out and exposed to the world. A fraud brought to light. What comes to their mind is an outrageous claim He made and they twist his words and ridicule him. *"Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!"*

In their taunt they assume that it is weakness on Jesus' part which is keeping him on the cross. Little do they know how wrong they are. It is an incredible strength which is allowing Jesus to endure the tortures of the cross. A strength founded in love for sinners. A love for the very ones who are insulting him.

Slightly off the road stand the religious leaders, the scribes, the chief priests and the elders. They too mock Jesus, but among themselves. They never talk to Him, such is their hatred for Him. You can just imagine them looking at Jesus, the one who had so threatened their power

and riches, the one who they had planned to kill a long time ago and saying with contempt : *“He saved others; Himself He cannot save. 32 Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe.”* They do not deny that Jesus performed miracles and healed people, they believed that the power came from Satan and now they believe that Satan had abandoned him. They too are making the mistake that it is weakness which is keeping Jesus on the Cross while in reality it is strength and love for sinners keeping Jesus on the cross. The religious leaders also blatantly deceive themselves. They say: *“descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe.”* If healing all kinds of diseases, restoring the sight of the blind, cleansing lepers, rising the dead and fulfilling prophecies did not cause them to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus coming down from the cross would not change their hardened hearts. Their words are a clear echo of the words found in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man

“ If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.”

The insulting also comes from the robbers hanging on crosses next to him. Although one repents eventually in an amazing act of God's mercy they both start off insulting Jesus, despite their clear wretched state.

No one holds back. The soldiers, those passing by, the scribes, the chief priests, the elders, the multitude of spectators and even those condemned with him hurl insults at him. And how does Jesus respond? How does he deal with these slanders against his name? He remains silent, calm and dignified, focusing on his mission.

Application – Payment for our sins

When Peter later writes of this time He says

who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; 24 who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. 1 Peter 2:23-24

Jesus remained silent. He did not throw insults back at his tormentors or threaten them as He very well could have. He does not strive to defend his name for he knows God will let them see who he is in all his glory in due time. He knows that God will have the last word and that these men will see justice.

Peter here not only explains how Jesus dealt with the suffering and insults but also why He died. But the reason only makes sense when we realize who we are before God. When we realize that we have broken God's law. When we realize that we are criminals before God. Only when we realize this, only then does Jesus' Crucifixion become relevant to us today. My sin and your sin deserves the death penalty, but Jesus agreed to claim your sin as his and die in your place. You deserve God's wrath because of your sin, but Jesus bore the full wrath of God when he was on the cross. He stood in your place and took the responsibility for your actions. So I plead with you, if you have not done so already, trust in Jesus' work on the cross, believe in him, turn away from sinning and be cleansed from guilt and shame and accepted into God's family.

Application – Complete cover of sins

And that punishment is complete. When Jesus pays for your sins, He completely pays for all of your sins. There is no debt left to be paid. If you trust that Jesus has paid for your sins, God will not punish you. Yes, God disciplines his children and Yes, sin has consequences, which we have to deal with in this life but the consequences are not God punishing us, but simply us reaping what we sow. When hard times come, when disease come, when tragedy comes our way, we must not think that it is God Punishing us for our sins.

Application – Facing Trails

And when these trials come, what comfort and confidence it is to look back to the cross. When the unfolding of events do not go according to what we planned. When things go terribly wrong in our eyes and there is no hope. When we loose someone who is close to us, a spouse, a child, a friend. When nothing makes sense and we feel we have wasted time and our life. When there is no hope, let us look to the cross and remember that for the disciples, at this point, all hope was lost. They had given up everything to follow Jesus and now he was dying on a roman cross. They had spent three years travelling the country with him, learning from him and now it was all for nothing. Their friend was unjustly taken from them and put to death for no reason. The injustice, the pain, the confusion. It was all very real. What they did not realize was that a victory was being won through this terrible time. An major victory. And we must cling to this, when it is our turn to face trials. We will feel pain, confusion and injustice but in those times, let us remember that we only see part of the picture, through blurry eyes, and God sees the whole picture with clear eyes. When trials come: Look to the cross!

Application - Repentance

When we realize and accept Jesus' sacrifice for our sin, the only right and natural response is to want to stop sinning, to repent, to turn away from our sinful actions. But we must remember that the work of Jesus on the cross is also the only way to overcome our sinful nature. Jesus has paid for our sins, but as humans, as sinners, we are slaves to sin. We may want to stop, but we are in bondage, living at the whim of our sinful nature, ever accumulating condemnation and consequences of sin, but through the blood of Christ you can be set free. Day in and day out we face temptations to sin. A slanderous word behind someone's back. A coarse joke, for the sake of a few laughs. Scrolling through images for the sake of gratification. Angry words justified in our mind. Prideful attitude and actions, strife, discontentment, envy... The list goes on. We live in a culture where sin is normalized, accepted and even glorified. The battle is on every front, every day. We are called to fight our sinful nature and stand firm against temptation, but not in our own strength. In our own strength we are sure to fail. Even if by intense discipline and strength you overcame lust, greed or anger, the sins of pride, arrogance and self-righteousness are made stronger and you are no closer to being Christ like.

The only way we can be victorious over sin in this life is through the power of the blood of Christ. We must fully depend on Him to overcome our sinful nature, to change our dark hearts and to change our desires. Through the blood of Christ we are no longer slaves to sin. We are easily deceived, believing the lie that sin still has power over us, but when we are tempted, we must remember that Jesus has overcome sin. He has received the lashes, endured the shame, carried the cross, and bore the pain. He is victorious, And through him we can be too.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to address two groups of people separately,

For those who are trying to be right before God on their own, I hope you can see the enormity of the gift and the futility of your own actions. God has made one way to be saved from our sins. It is a gift. All that you have to do is accept the gift and turn from your sin.

And for those who are relying on Jesus' sacrifice to be right before God and who know they are part of God's family, let this be a reminder that your place was bought at a very high price, that your sin is paid in full and that there is no condemnation for you. In trials look to the cross. In temptation look to the cross. In all things and in all times, look to the cross.

Let us pray.