

The Death of Jesus -- Mark 15:21-37

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer.

Father, I am humbled by the great task before me. The death of Your only Son is worthy of the most profound study and meditation. May Jesus and Him crucified be clearly set before us today. In His name we pray, amen.

There are men and women throughout history whose deaths left an incredible void. Think of the loss felt by the Israelites at the death of Moses. How many Americans must have mourned the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln! When Martin Luther King Jr.'s life was snuffed out, what a void it must have left in the hearts of those whose rights he championed. Imagine the loss felt by Calcutta, India when Mother Theresa passed away. A local example took place just this past Memorial Day (2014). Dr. Qamar, one of the cardiologists at Fairfield Medical Center, was assassinated in his home country of Pakistan by Islamic militants. He was a member of the Islamic Ahmadiyya Community, who sacrifice their wealth, honor, and even their lives to uphold the true values of Islam: love, caring, and peace. (see Fairfield Medical Center's special "Monday Morning" edition honoring Dr. Mehdi Qamar, article entitled, "The Answer to the Question, 'Why?'" by Abdus S. Malik M.D.) Those of us who knew Dr. Qamar have felt the void left behind following his passing.

But while nations and even the world may have mourned the loss of these extraordinary people, the void left by the death of Christ was infinitely greater. Today we will contemplate the hour when the Giver of life breathed His last.

Here's a summary of our story today:

Jesus was crucified between two criminals. While on the cross He continued to be mocked and insulted. At noon the whole area became dark for three hours. Two times Jesus cried out with a loud voice. One was a cry of despair to God. The other came out with His last breath.

We will now consider what Jesus experienced in this story. First of all, He experienced being unable to carry His cross. It was the Roman custom for criminals condemned to crucifixion to carry their own crosses. So it is quite telling that Mark 15:21 describes someone else being forced to carry Jesus' cross. John 19:17 states that Jesus did actually carry His cross. Apparently, though, Jesus' humanity reached a breaking point. Fainting, He collapsed under the burden. At that point Mark says they (the Roman soldiers) compelled Simon to carry Jesus' cross. Simon was a foreigner from Cyrene, Libya in Africa who "just happened" to be passing by. It may have seemed at the moment that he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. No one in the crowd dared to volunteer to take Jesus' cross. In their estimation it would have been too humiliating or defiling in their Passover celebration. Remember, though, that when Jesus had reached points in His life when He needed help, the angels had always been there for Him. So with Jesus lying flat on the ground with the cross weighing on His back, how astonishing that no one from heaven came to His rescue. Perhaps this was a blessing designed by God for Simon. I can imagine Simon later looked back on that experience and thanked God for it. Perhaps it motivated him to willingly carry whatever duty God chose for him.

Secondly, Jesus experienced refusing relief from pain. Mark 15:22 says that they took Jesus to a place called "Golgotha", a word meaning, "skull". No one knows for sure the exact location of this site. However, Hebrews 13:12 states that Jesus suffered outside the gate. So, Golgotha was likely just outside the city walls of Jerusalem. Mark 15:23 says that the soldiers gave Jesus some wine mixed with myrrh. It was probably a mild pain killer. While most criminals were likely desperate for any help they could get, relief from pain was not Jesus' first priority. Mark records that He refused to drink it.

Third, Jesus experienced being crucified. Up to this point Jesus had submitted to the Sanhedrin's malicious actions. But the question still remained, "Would Jesus allow Himself to be nailed to the cross?" It was so wrong and cruel. How could God allow it? Two times, though, Mark records that Jesus let them nail those

spikes into His body. The words are few and final: "They crucified Him." Again, I find it astonishing that no one from heaven stepped in to rescue Jesus. How hard it must have been for them not to.

Mark records several surrounding details in Mark 15:24-27. The soldiers divided Jesus' garments. They have taken everything they could from Jesus, even His clothes. Mark then tells us that Jesus was crucified at the third hour. The time seems significant as God has His own special timing for all that He does. The equivalent hour in our day would 9:00 AM. A further detail is recorded in verse 26. Jesus' accusation was nailed above Him - *The King of the Jews*. This was the reason Pilate gave for Jesus' execution. But it also stood as a silent witness of Christ's true identity. In verse 27 Mark describes two robbers' being crucified with Jesus - one on either side. These were likely Barabbas' fellow rebels mentioned in Mark 15:7. The point becomes evident, then, that Jesus was crucified on Barabbas' cross.

Fourth, Jesus experienced more mockery and insults. The people were relentless. Their hatred and cruelty could not be satisfied. While Jesus was hanging on the cross, they continued to shout out demeaning and insulting comments at Jesus. Mark 15:29 records the words of "those who passed by". Mockingly, they cried, "Save Yourself!" The insinuation was, "if You're such a powerful King!" Verse 31 records the added mockery of the "chief priests and scribes". Their words were similar: "He saved others. Himself He cannot save." While spoken as an insult, these words reveal the glorious truth. Jesus had raised people from the dead. But in order to save lost humanity, He could not save Himself. Death would surely come to the world, if not to Jesus. In verse 32 the high priests and scribes claim that if Jesus did somehow magically come down from the cross, they would believe in Him as the Messiah. As if they did not have sufficient evidence already! A third source of insults came from those who were crucified with Jesus. This seems incredible to me. I can't imagine using my last energy to join in insulting an innocent man. It's a miracle that Jesus, hanging on the cross, stayed self-controlled. Speaking of miracles, Luke records another one in his account of the two criminals on either side of Jesus. In Luke 23:39-43 we find that one of the criminals changed his mind. He came under conviction that Jesus really was the King of the Jews.

At this point I invite you to turn with me to Psalm 22. We will read verses 6-8 and 16-18. (Read) Keep in mind Roman crucifixion hadn't been invented at the time David wrote this. And yet his words are almost an exact quote from Mark 15. What an anchor for our faith in Christ!

Fifth, Jesus experienced feeling forsaken by God. Up to this point Jesus had drawn His strength from His connection with God. But while on the cross, even that was taken away from Him. Mark 15:33 describes a three hour interlude of supernatural blackness. It took place at the sixth hour until the ninth hour, which would be in our time from noon to 3:00 PM. This seems to have been an act of mercy from God. Finally Jesus was hidden from His persecutors, who now had yet another sign that Jesus was their King. Even inanimate creation showed distress at the cruel treatment of its Creator. I invite you to turn with me to Psalm 18:11, which reveals yet another possible reason for this darkness. (Read) This darkness was an opportunity for the Father to draw near His Son unseen. Mark 15:34 seems to support the idea that the Father was present in the darkness. At the end of those three hours, Jesus felt an overwhelming loss. When the darkness lifted, Jesus felt like the Father had left Him alone. In His despair He cried out with a loud voice. His cry must have been startling to those standing by. It had just been completely black. Jesus had been so weak He couldn't carry His own cross. And suddenly a piercing cry filled the air.

Jesus' words here are full of significance, so much so that they have been recorded in the language He spoke. Mark follows up the quote with a translation into Greek. Jesus had been abandoned by everyone. His only anchor had been His Father. And now for the first time He felt disconnected from Him who had been His Leader and Friend. The people had no clue what Jesus was talking about. After recovering from their fear, they show a mixture of concern & mockery. Someone tried to bring Jesus relief by offering Him some sour wine. Others mistakenly interpreted His cry as a call to Elijah. These had little sympathy for Him, and resumed their distancing and ridicule.

Last of all, Jesus experienced giving up His life. Mark 15:37 gives us an insightful description of the end of Jesus' life. His last breath exhaled in a loud voice. How often His breathing out had brought life. Back in

Genesis 2:7 it had given life to Adam, the father of the human race. The word translated, "cried out" in Mark 15:37 means to "let go". Jesus consciously and purposefully handed His life over to His Father. Luke 23:46 actually records Jesus' words at this point: "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." He completely trusted His Father to the end, even with His own life. His submission was complete to His final breath. There is significance also in that Jesus' last breath was accompanied by a loud voice. He did not die in defeat, but in triumph and victory. By His death He had saved the world.

Turn with me to John 10. We will read verses 11, 15, and 17-18. These are Jesus' own words spoken shortly before His death. (Read) Jesus repeatedly declared that His death was completely voluntary. No one took His life from Him. Like Isaac voluntarily lying down on the altar (Gen. 22:9), Jesus chose to give His breath of life to God. It was the ultimate demonstration of His love for His sheep.

This concludes our look at what Jesus experienced. I've struggled to know how best to spend the next few minutes. There are several different directions we could go. I find it inspiring that Jesus exuded Scripture in His darkest hour. In His supreme anguish on the cross, feeling abandoned by His Father, His words are a narration of Psalm 22:1 – "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" I am also struck by Jesus' refusal of the sour wine. He was not afraid of pain. And He wanted a clear mind to the end. For me this is good news. He has set me free from fear of pain. He has shown me how important it is to keep my mind free from the unhealthy influences of drugs, alcohol and gluttony. We could also take time to investigate the horror and pain of Jesus' crucifixion. We could consider what was lost in His death. A mother lost a Son, as did God Himself. Many who had been sick lost a Healer. Those inspired by Jesus' words lost a Teacher. Eleven men lost a Master. And all creation lost a Creator.

But here is a point that supersedes all of the previous ones: what was gained by Jesus' death. Turn with me to John 12:24. Verse 20 mentions that many people who were not Jews had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Some of them came looking for Jesus. When Jesus heard about it, He said, "This is the hour for Me to be glorified." To explain what He meant, He told a parable. Notice His words in verse 24. (Read) When I was growing up, I enjoyed planting seeds. Some were pumpkin and squash. Others were carrot and lettuce. I distinctly remember the corn kernels as they were pink from the insecticide or fungicide. Jesus refers to putting these seeds into the ground as burying them in death. The only way to get a fruit or vegetable out of a seed is to bury it. In the same way, the only way for Jesus' life to produce a human race with eternal life was for Him to die. He had to lose His life for us to gain life.

Romans 5:8 expands this thought, further revealing what was gained by Jesus' death. I invite you to turn there with me. In verse 7 Paul says that someone might be willing to die for someone they admired or looked up to. Think of some of those we talked about in the introduction. I'm sure someone would have been willing to die for Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King Jr. so that their ministry could have continued. But notice what Paul says in verse 8 of Romans 5. (Read) Christ's death for selfish and mean people demonstrated God's love as never before. We gained a whole new understanding of God's love through Jesus' death. No one had done anything to earn God's love. His love is not selective but instead, universal. It does not fluctuate, but is constant. You cannot earn His love or make Him love you more or less. The answer to the question, "Does God love me?" has been forever settled. If we look down a couple verses to Romans 5:10, we will see what else was gained by Jesus' death. (Read) Jesus' death reconciled us to God. A broken relationship was restored. Now we can relate to God just as Jesus did. His is our Father, Companion, and Leader, too.

Last of all, turn over a page to Romans 6:6. (Read) This gets real personal and experiential. When Jesus died, our sinful nature died. Paul tells us why this is such good news. We can now be sure that this body subject to sickness and death will one day be taken away from us. For us it won't be through a painful, lonely crucifixion, but in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye (1 Corinthians 15:50-53). Also, Jesus' death has set us free from slavery to sin. By God's grace you know how enslaving sin is. The movies, magazines, and internet do such a good job glamorizing it. Temptations is a popular singing group. Movies and TV shows are given names such as Envy, Deception, Revenge, and American Idol. But go to the jails, hospitals, and slums. Here sin is exposed for the tyrant that it is. Christ was free from sin's slavery. And His freedom is now ours. Praise the Lord!

Wouldn't it be terrible if all that Christ's death has gained for us was lost? In Galatians 2:21 Paul comments on an awful possibility: that Christ's death for you would be in vain. The context of this verse describes someone who is trying to please God and earn His favor. You can't do this. That's why Christ died. Jesus earned for you God's favor. Take the free gift. Enjoy the peace you now have with God. He loves you. There's an eternity with Jesus waiting for you.