



The Ransom

Mark 15:16-39

David Sunday April 5, 2020

Good morning, New Covenant family. You probably recognize what I'm holding in my hand and you probably have several of these in your home. It's a photo album full of wonderful memories. I'm opening it up right now to the page that has a picture of our kids' first day of school in August 2009. I'm sure they're glad the zoom lens isn't focusing in on this any closer or any longer than it is.

We put pictures in an album because they tell a story—a story we don't want to forget, one we want to treasure and remember. That's what we have in Mark 15. The whole chapter is a photo album of the coronation of the King. You remember on Palm Sunday Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to be crowned as King. In Mark's Gospel, half of the occurrences of the word "king" used in the whole Gospel occur right here in chapter 15.

So children, as you're working on your worksheets, I'd like you to mark every time you hear that word "king" in the sermon today. Maybe you'll want to flip it over to the other side and draw a picture of one of the scenes we're going to read about in God's Word.

Mark is telling us the story of the King's coronation ceremony through a series of small snapshots. He's moving quickly from scene to scene. But unlike the coronation ceremony of Queen Elizabeth II which was filled with pictures of regal splendor and majesty and beauty, this is a story filled with pictures of horror and grief and pain.

The right response, as we approach a passage like this, is not to dissect its words, but instead to dissolve our hearts with thankfulness and melt our eyes in tears. The first scene is in Mark 15:16-20:

¹⁶ The soldiers led [Jesus] away into the palace (that is, the governor's residence) and called the whole company together. ¹⁷ They dressed him in a purple robe, twisted together a crown of thorns, and put it on him. ¹⁸ And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ¹⁹ They were hitting him on the head with a stick and spitting on him. Getting down on their knees, they were paying him homage. ²⁰ After they had

mocked him, they stripped him of the purple robe and put his clothes on him. They led him out to crucify him.

Now, a palace would be a perfect setting for a royal procession and ceremony. But instead we find here a King Who has just been flogged. His back is bloodied. His skin is torn. As they gather the crowd together to make a public spectacle of His disrobing, they rip off His clothes and put on what was probably the dirty mantle of a soldier, cast aside—a purple robe, the color of majesty—and they place it on Him. Then they crown Him.

In the Roman Empire, a beautifully woven headpiece would sometimes be placed on the winner of an athletic event or a golden wreath would be placed on the head of a king as a sign of authority. But no winner, no ruler ever was known to wear a crown of thorns. This was all a cruel public joke. It was an expression of the pent-up rage of these soldiers being unleashed on Jesus because they wanted to torture and humiliate Him.

They pressed this crown of thorns into His skull enough so it stayed on His head through the remainder of His life. Why this crown of thorns? Well, remember what we read in Genesis 3 about the disobedience of man and its consequences. God cursed the earth with thorns because of human sin. Michael Card writes, “Now God’s Son carries that curse on His head.”

The thorns also speak of wilderness and Jesus, Who knew the wilderness so well, now embarks on a journey. He will carry that twisted crown of shame into the wasteland of our sin. He will become lost and forsaken there, to recreate and redeem this cursed world. He’s fulfilling what Isaiah spoke of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 50:6: *“I gave my back to those who beat me, and my cheeks to those who tore out my beard. I did not hide my face from scorn and spitting.”*

Has anyone ever mocked you? Do you remember what it felt like? I can think of a couple times in my life when I’ve experienced mocking that produced such embarrassment my eyes were filled with tears. Sadly, I can remember a couple times when I’ve participated in mocking others.

But this is the One of Whom Mark speaks in the first verse of this Gospel, stating that He is *“Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”* This is the Christ, Who is anointed with the Holy Spirit to be God’s King. This is the Son of God, Who before there ever was a universe, looked into the face of Almighty God from all eternity and called Him Father. This is the One at Whose baptism the heavens opened and a voice thundered, *“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”* (Mark 1:9-11). Then again at the Transfiguration, He heard the voice coming from the cloud of majesty, saying, *“This is my beloved Son; listen to him”* (Mark 9:2-8).

This is the eternal Son of the Father:

- filled by God with the Holy Spirit

- in Whom the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily
- the One Who is God, Who is filled by God with all the fullness of God
- Who is the Lord of this world
- the mighty Maker of all
- the Author of life
- the One in Whom all things hold together
- the Centerpiece of all reality
- Who is the blessed and only Sovereign
- the King of kings and Lord of lords

How did we honor Him? We tore the skin off His back. We put a dirty robe on His open wounds. We twisted a crown of thorns and pressed it into His skull. We saluted Him with jeers. We hit Him on His head and face. We spit on Him. We mocked Him mercilessly. Then we stripped Him of that purple robe and put His own blood-stained clothes back on Him for just a little bit, then we led Him out to crucify Him. That brings us to Mark 15:21, the second photo.

²¹ They forced a man coming in from the country, who was passing by, to carry Jesus's cross. He was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.

Jesus has just had a sleepless night, filled with mocking, spitting, slapping, beating and scourging. Now the upper beam of the cross on which He will die is loaded on to His bloodied, lacerated shoulders. Over a hundred pounds of rugged, splintering wood is pressing into His festering wounds; it's straining His aching muscles and tendons to the point of exhaustion. The torture renders this strong carpenter from Nazareth unable to carry the beam any further.

So the soldiers hastily grab a foreigner from Libya who was in the crowd. Not out of mercy—no. If these soldiers let Jesus die on the way, they're going to be in trouble for not finishing their job. These men are doing this because they're fearful of punishment and perhaps because they're so bloodthirsty they want to make sure they really do get Him up there on that cross, that He really does experience the full weight of His punishment. So Simon of Cyrene is compelled by force to carry the cross of Jesus.

This is a picture of what all Jesus' disciples had failed to do when they all abandoned Him and fled. There's a hint here that this transformed Simon's life. Mark unusually adds a detail that none of the other Gospel writers have: he was the father of Alexander and Rufus. Mark was writing his Gospel originally for the church in Rome. In Romans 16:13, the apostle Paul addressed a man named Rufus, "*chosen by the Lord.*" It's likely that Simon of Cyrene became a follower of Jesus and told his family about Jesus, then his sons followed Him too.

That brings us to the next scene, Mark 15:22-23:

²² They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of the Skull). ²³ They tried to give him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.

This wine mixed with myrrh would have been like a narcotic, dulling the pain. But Jesus is determined to drink the cup of wrath down to its dregs. He is going to consciously endure every aspect of suffering for our sins to the fullest extent. There will be no point at which Jesus unconsciously bears our guilt and shame. He came, *“not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45).

A ransom is a price that is paid in order to rescue someone who is being held captive. It's the rescue price of freedom for slaves. Jesus has come to the end of the ransom road and He's not going to turn back. Out of love, He is going to fully pay the price to rescue us from the wages of our sin, which is death (Romans 6:23), and He's going to experience the payment of that ransom to the uttermost in Himself.

That brings us to Mark 15:24-27:

²⁴ Then they crucified him and divided his clothes, casting lots for them to decide what each would get. ²⁵ Now it was nine in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶ The inscription of the charge written against him was: THE KING OF THE JEWS. ²⁷ They crucified two criminals with him, one on his right and one on his left.

The shame. The indignity. The degradation intensified as Jesus is now stripped of His clothes in public and is lifted up to die on that cross. Mark spares us the physical details of crucifixion, first of all because most of his readers would have been well aware of what takes place when someone is crucified. It was the cruelest and most barbaric of punishments, designed to torture the worst of criminals and reserved only for the lowest classes of society and for slaves. It was intended to humiliate the victim and terrify all who were watching. It was a long, agonizing death of prolonged asphyxiation while being exposed to the elements of nature, with the birds of prey hovering above.

Mostly, Mark spares us the details because the physical details aren't the main point. The main point is Who is being crucified and what He is accomplishing in the process. Down below, as Jesus looks upon the soldiers, He sees them gambling over His clothes, not knowing they are fulfilling God's plan prophesied in Psalm 22:16-18 where King David writes:

¹⁶ For dogs have surrounded me; a gang of evildoers has closed in on me; they pierced my hands and my feet. ¹⁷ I can count all my bones;

people look and stare at me. ¹⁸ They divided my garments among themselves, and they cast lots for my clothing.

That's what's happening here at 9:00 in the morning. Written over His head in three different languages is the international proclamation of His crime, designed to mock Him: "The King of the Jews." But ironically, as they think they're making a laughingstock of Him, as they think they're carrying out a mock enthronement, they are actually really crowning Him as King. He really is the King. This really is His crowning moment. This really is His throne, as He's nailed to this cross of wood.

What Mark is doing in his account is mocking the mockery. He's telling us the One Who is being mocked as the King truly is the King—not only of the Jews, but of all the nations. The secret of His Kingdom—which is hidden from the eyes of all but those who believe—is that the King of Israel is a suffering and rejected Messiah. This is how His Kingdom comes, not by human power, not by human might, but by suffering, humiliation, rejection and death—even death on a cross.

Do you remember the question the disciples were arguing over just a few chapters earlier when they were debating who would sit at the right hand and left hand of Jesus when He comes in the glory of His Kingdom? Finally, Mark gives us the answer to that question here in verse 27: *"They crucified two criminals with him, one on his right and one on his left."*

Why? Because here is a King Who came, not to identify with the righteous, but with sinners. Here is a Physician Who came to heal, not the healthy, but the sick. Here is a Savior Who came to rescue what is despised and insignificant in the world, what is viewed as nothing, in order to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, so that no one may boast in His presence. Because of His obedience and humiliation, God says of Him in Isaiah 53:12, *"Therefore I will give him the many as a portion, and he will receive the mighty as spoil, because he willingly submitted to death, and was counted among the rebels; yet he bore the sin of many and interceded for the rebels."*

As King Jesus is enthroned upon that awful tree, He does not hear what most kings and queens hear from the crowds on the day of their coronation. "God save the king! God save the king! God save the king!" Instead, what He hears is described for us in verses 29 through 32:

²⁹ Those who passed by were yelling insults at him, shaking their heads, and saying, "Ha! The one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, ³⁰ save yourself by coming down from the cross!" ³¹ In the same way, the chief priests with the scribes were mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others, but he cannot save himself! ³² Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come

down now from the cross, so that we may see and believe.” Even those who were crucified with him taunted him.

The irony of it is that Jesus might actually have found comfort in these taunts, for they would have reminded Him of the promise of His resurrection. Indeed, God was going to rebuild the temple in three days by raising Jesus—the new and living temple—from the dead. Another irony is that what they are saying is actually true. Of course, Jesus could have saved Himself, but had He done that, He could not have saved others. In order to save others, in order to do what He came into the world to do—to give His life as a ransom for many—He must lose His life. So it was not weakness but love that kept Him there.

As the chief priests and scribes join in the mocking, saying in effect, “It’s His fault that we don’t believe in Him. If only He would step down from that cross, then we would believe.” But they did not believe when Jesus rose from the dead, did they?

Leon Morris puts it like this: “Their whole outlook was wrong. They said they would have believed He was the Son of God had He come down from the cross. We believe He was the Son of God because He stayed up.”

He stayed up. He stayed up on that cross, even hearing the last words in His ears before He died—the insults of the criminals around Him. Charles Spurgeon, thinking on this, called it “the greatest act of love in human history.” Jesus looks down from His cross at a mass of humanity, mocking and jeering and spitting on Him, and He hears the taunts of the criminals on either side—one of whom is going to be saved this very day as He looks to Jesus and says, “Remember me.” The greatest act of love is that Jesus did not come down from that cross, but He stayed. And because He stayed, we can be saved. Praise Him for that.

That brings us to Mark 15:33:

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ And at three Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lemá sabachtháni?” which is translated, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

It’s pitch black in this photo. We cannot peer into what’s happening as the full velocity of God’s wrath on human sin comes barreling down on the soul of His holy beloved Son. When God was rescuing the children of Israel from Egypt, He sent plagues. The ninth plague was a plague of total darkness—darkness so thick it could be felt (Exodus 10:21-29). The next plague after that was the death of the firstborn son and the Passover. (Exodus 11-12). Three days of darkness in Egypt is now being fulfilled by three hours of bleak, utter darkness in Jerusalem. The death of the firstborn

sons in Egypt is now being fulfilled in the death of God's one and only beloved Son in Jerusalem. The blood of the lamb that covered the doorposts of believers in Egypt is now finding its fulfillment in the blood of the Lamb Who is covering the sins of the world for everyone who will believe in Him at Golgotha, outside the gates of Jerusalem.

There in the pitch darkness of Good Friday, Jesus is bearing the awful weight of God's wrath for you so that you will not have to hear these awful words from Him: "*Cast this worthless servant into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*" (Matthew 25:30). The soul and body of Jesus is enveloped in the darkness that can be felt so poignantly so that He can deliver all who believe in Him from the utter darkness of hell.

Hell envelops Jesus on that cross and He bears its horrors in your place and in my place, so that you and I who believe in Him will never have to say what comes from His lips next. "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Mark 15:34). Instead, we know He will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). This darkest cry came from our Savior under the darkest sky, so that you and I can become sons and daughters of the light. You can become the son or daughter of light by fleeing to Jesus, Who bore God's judgment for you.

Do not deceive yourself that sin is no big deal. Ponder the dreadful darkness through which Jesus passed as a judgment on your sin and let that convince you of the horror of sin. If you live and die with your sins unforgiven, you will live and die in darkness. But you don't need to live and die in darkness, because Jesus burst forth in glorious day and He's calling you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Charles Spurgeon says, "The cross is the lighthouse which guides poor weather-beaten humanity into the harbor of peace."

That's what we see starting to unfold in the verses that follow. In verse 37 we read, "*Jesus let out a loud cry and breathed his last.*" Heaven responded with an earthquake that tore the thickly embroidered curtain of the temple that separated the most holy place—where God dwelt then—from sinful humanity. That curtain had been like a huge "No trespassing" sign. "Do not come any further. Tread here at your own risk." Anyone who passed beyond that curtain would die. That curtain was torn in two from top to bottom as a message to all of us that the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world has opened up a new and living way for sinners to come boldly into God's presence, drawing near to Him and knowing Him as Father (Hebrews 10:19-23). We no longer need to bring a sacrifice to atone for our sins. All we need to do is bring our sins and lay them all on the head of Jesus, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29-34).

Once we've done that, keep looking to Jesus' cross. Keep pondering what He did there for you. Because when we lose our focus on the cross of Jesus, we tend to start thinking the curtain

has gone back up and that God is at a distance from us. We tend to hide from Him. But the cross beckons us near. The cross says, “You can get close to Me now. I am a reconciled God Who smiles on you in blessing.”

Put your hope in Jesus. Do as the centurion did. I don’t know what was going on in his mind and heart as he watched Simon of Cyrene carry that cross while Jesus was making His way up the hill of Golgotha. I don’t know what he was thinking as he and his mobs pounded the nails into Jesus’ hands and feet. I wonder if Jesus was peering into his eyes with such tender love that this centurion—who had seen many hundreds of people die and who was no soft sentimentalist—this hardened man was being melted by the love of Jesus. As Jesus breathed His last, Mark tells us in verse 39:

³⁹ When the centurion, who was standing opposite him, saw the way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

Jeremy Treat comments that what the mockers saw as laughable, the centurion saw as laudable. That’s the response the Holy Spirit through Mark wants to produce in each and every one of us. He wants us to see all that happens in Mark 15 and put it all into a photo collage. He wants us to gaze at it as a whole and realize it’s telling us a story. It’s proclaiming to us a message of a King of grace Who reigns from a cross of love, Who is truly the Son of God.

Friends, the cross is the dividing line of history. It’s the point at which the wrath of God is fully absorbed for the sins of all who will trust in Him, so they can be freed from the dominion of sin, freed from the tyranny of death and freed from the accusations of Satan and the torments of hell.

The cross is also the dividing line of humanity. It splits the world in two. Some look at the cross and say it’s pathetic and weak and foolish. The Bible says, “If that’s the way you see the cross, you’re perishing.” But others, through the grace and mercy of God, look at the cross, seeing power, beauty and salvation. God says, “If that’s the way you view the cross of Jesus, then you are being saved.” For Mark, the cross is not a defeat—it’s a triumph. It’s through the suffering of the Messiah that the Kingdom of God comes in power.

How this should encourage us today, church, as we are a church in lock-down mode, unable to gather together. I want us to view this time, not as a defeat, not as a time of mourning, but as a time of humbling when we can reacquaint ourselves with where the real power comes from. The power does not come from our buildings. The power does not come from our slick productions. The power does not come from our worship services or even from our sermons. The power is in the

gospel of a crucified and risen Savior and the Holy Spirit is still powerfully working through that gospel today.

When we only look through the eyes of unbelief, we see power in human notions of rule. But when we look through the eyes of faith, we see that it's here in weakness—in the place of great pain and great suffering—that the greatest power of God is on display. So could it be that Jesus is using this time in the nation and the world—and in our church—to refine us, recalibrate us, reorient us to the cross of Christ? And by His mercy, by the Spirit, could He use this time to revive His church in our day? Could it be that the shutting down of our public gatherings for a time is what God wants to use for us to humble ourselves from relying on human power and human strength, instead seeking His power which paradoxically is found in weakness?

I want to encourage you, friends, not to shrink back and feel defeated during this week of Easter, but to lean in. Use this time to seek God with a greater hunger and thirst than you've ever known. I want to invite you, if you're physically able, to join the elders and me in a day of fasting and prayer on Good Friday, using this time to meditate on our Savior's passion. Ask God to show you where you've been relying on human strength and power instead of embracing the way of Christ. Seek God throughout the day, then we'll make our first meal on Good Friday the holy communion we'll partake of in our homes together in our service on Friday night.

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God and the wisdom of God, so that anyone who boasts should boast only in the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:18, 31). Amen.

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