

THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS

I always consider it a great privilege and a great responsibility open the Word of God and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Most Sundays I feel both a heavy sense of my duty before God as well as a wonderful joy in proclaiming the truth of God's Word. Many times I feel an overwhelming sense of my unworthiness and my inadequacy to bring God's message to you. Today, as we come to the crux of the Gospel of Mark, I feel that insufficiency even more. How can I even scratch the surface of this passage, let alone plumb the depths of the meaning of the cross?

Today we have come to the crucial passage in the Gospel of Mark, the crucifixion of Jesus. In fact the word crucial and the word crux are both derived from the word crucifixion. The cross of Jesus Christ is the most essential message of the Gospel. Everything in the Gospel of Mark has been building up to and pointing to this passage where Jesus dies on a cross.

In some ways, we have become too accustomed to the cross. We see crosses every day of our lives. Many churches have them atop their steeples. There is one behind me right now as I preach this message. There is a cross on the front of our building.

Listen to what Paul says about the preaching of the cross, 1 Corinthians 1:23-24: **"but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."**

The cross is offensive to some people. In 1 Cor. 1:23, Paul calls it a **"stumblingblock"**. This word comes from the Greek word **"skandalon"** which meant a **trap** or a **snare**. It came to mean **something that trips a person up and causes them to fall**. We get the English word **"scandal"** from this word. To the Jews, the cross was a scandal! They could not conceive of the Messiah being nailed to a cross! They literally stumbled over the cross!

The cross is foolishness to some people. In 1 Cor. 1:23, Paul uses tells us that the Greeks considered the cross to be **"foolishness"**. This word comes from the Greek word **"moria"**, which gives us the English word **"moron"**. The sophisticated Greeks looked at a Savior dying on a cross and they declared it to be **"moronic foolishness"**.

But, for the called, the cross is power and wisdom. In 1 Cor. 1:24, Paul says that those who have grasped the true message of the cross understand that it is not weak or foolish. It is the power of God because through the cross God forever destroyed the kingdom of Satan and broke the grip of sin. It is the wisdom of God because in the cross, God used a tool that neither man nor devil could have ever foreseen to accomplish salvation for His people.

Today, we come to the message of the cross. It is not a weak message; it is not a foolish message. It is a message filled with the awesome power and wisdom of Almighty God. Let the message of the cross speak to your heart today. If you are saved rejoice in what God accomplished at the cross. If you are not saved, you really need to hear this message today.

Let the words of the Gospel sink in deeply at I read Mark 15:21-39:

- 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 believe." Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him.
- 33 Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.
- 34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"
- 35 Some of those who stood by, when they heard that, said, "Look, He is calling for Elijah!"
- 36 Then someone ran and filled a sponge full of sour wine, put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink, saying, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to take Him down."
- 37 And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last.
- 38 Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.
- 39 So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!"

I. A Message of Strength out of Weakness v. 20-25

The message of the cross is a message of pain, suffering and death. Three times we are told in these verses that Jesus was "**crucified**", v. 20, 24-25. We get the English word "**Excruciating**" from two Latin words: "**ex**" which means "**out of**" and "**cruciare**", which means "**the cross**". A death on the cross was so painful that it came to be associated with any pain that caused extreme suffering. Mark does not have to explain crucifixion to his first readers. Most of them had seen men nailed to crosses. And even though the death Jesus died was a horrible, painful death, the gospel writers don't focus on the physical pain.

Most of this passage is in the vivid present tense. Even though in the KJV we find past tense words, Mark writes the story as if it is occurring before Him and us. They carry

Him, they crucify Him, they divide His garments, they are wagging their heads. Like waves that crash in and over again and again so Mark portrays the drama before us.

In many artists conception of the crucifixion, Christ is painted as valiantly facing death standing straight and stalwart with a glow of light all around Him stronger than all others around the Cross. But this picture is not the one Mark paints. He paints one weaker than the weakest, fainter than the faintest.

Verse 21 tells us that the Roman soldiers compelled Simon of Cyrene to bear the cross for Jesus. John tells us that Jesus started out carrying His own cross to Calvary. Perhaps Jesus was so weak that He could not go fast enough for the soldiers, perhaps He fell under the load.

Jesus, who would bear the sins of the world had to have someone else bear His cross.

But Jesus' weakness was a willing weakness. We read in verse 23 that they tried to give Him wine mixed with myrrh but He did not take it. The Talmud tells us that certain women of Jerusalem would provide this wine mixed with myrrh as an anesthetic to those who were crucified.

Jesus refuses it. He will not abate or ameliorate or minimize that cup of suffering. Jesus was resolved to taste the death and the punishment at its bitterest, facing it with His eyes wide open. For the pain and penalty that was before Him to pay for the sins of the world He needed full use of His human faculties to completely drain the cup which was the Father's will for Him to drink (10:38; 14:36). Jesus' weakness was a willing weakness.

Many of those who followed after our Lord in the trail of martyrs died with strength and vitality. In Eusebius's Ecclesiastical History account of the death of the martyrs you read the story of Polycarp of Smyrna who goes to his death with strength and dignity and force of life. He stood at the stake, not tied up, but stood there until the flames consumed him.

Contrast that with Jesus. For the message of the Cross is that our strength comes out of His utter weakness. Our endurance out of His faintness, our healing out of His wounds, our life out of His death.

II. A Message of Glory out of Shame v. 24-28

Verse 24 has more of these vivid present tense verbs. "And they are crucifying Him, and they are parting His garments and dividing up His garments among themselves, casting lots for them." Notice how many of these verses begin with "and," and, and, and. In fact, this is one long sentence which Mark has written as if He was breathless to finish the scenario before he put down his pen. Mark says that the soldiers, like gamblers do, take everything. They strip Jesus naked, part His garments and cast lots for them. We are forced to see the shame of Jesus, naked on the Cross.

The shame and indignity of the Cross was that they even stripped Him of His last possession and gave Him a cross. And we see the message of the cross, that out of His shame and nakedness comes His glory and crown. Paul says in Philippians 2:8-9, **"He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name."** Because He bore the shame of nakedness on the cross, we can be clothed in His righteousness. Again Paul says, **"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."** He who died naked for us can cover our nakedness before the all seeing eyes of God with His shed blood.

Jesus was crucified like the worst of criminal between two criminals. Verse 27 says, **"With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left."** Mark tells us that this fulfilled the scripture which says, **"And He was numbered with the transgressors."** (Isaiah 53:12).

The shame of Jesus' death was a fulfillment of God's plan. He was numbered with the transgressors so that we could be numbered with those who are saved.

III. A Message of Testimony out of Mocking v. 29-32

Pilate mocks Jesus in the written notice of the charge against Him, **"The King of the Jews."** It was meant to be a slap in the face to both Jesus and to the Jews who called for His death. It was Pilate's way of flaunting his power over the Jews and their supposed Messiah.

And yet there is a testimony in his mocking. Pilate wrote the message of the cross and published it in three languages. He unwittingly confessed to the world the truth that Jesus of Nazareth is King of the Jews.

And as Jesus hung on that cross, giving His life for the lost, His enemies circled Him like a flock of hungry vultures. The religious leaders, the passers by, and even those of the other crosses mocked their Messiah as He died on the cross. They hated Him so much that they made fun of Him and taunted Him as He died. Look at verse 29, **"And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads."** The One falsely accused of blasphemy became the object of blasphemy.

Their taunts at the cross are really testimonies. Out of blind ignorance a hate filled mob seized the one thing that He said that caught everyone's attention: He said **"destroy this Temple and I'll raise it up again in three days."** (John 2:19). John says Jesus was speaking of the temple of His body (2:21). But at the cross, they mocked Him saying, **"Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!"**

They would destroy the temple of His body. But God will raise it up on the third day. So the mocking mob speaks the truth of His bodily resurrection.

Mark says the chief priests also taunted Him, telling Him to come down from the cross if He was really Who He claimed to be. They said, **"He saved others; Himself He cannot save"**, verse 31. They said, **"If He is the king of Israel, let Him come down now!"** The truth they spoke that day still rings true today, **"He saved others, Himself He could not save."** He could not save Himself, if He was to save us. Had Jesus saved Himself and come down from the cross we would still be lost. His death was essential. It was crucial. Without the death of Jesus we could not be saved. He could have saved Himself, **v. 31**, but He stayed on the cross to save sinners!

So in their mocking they brought a testimony of the message of the cross.

IV. A Message of Light out of Darkness v. 33-36

After man had done his best to ridicule and belittle the Lord Jesus, God turned the lights out on the cross. It is as if God was saying, *"You have mocked Him enough!"* But, during those hours of darkness, Jesus suffered the worst of His torments. For, it was during those dark hours that your sins and mine were transferred to Him, **2 Cor. 5:21; Isa. 53:6, 9.**

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out the words of Psalm 22, with a loud voice, saying, **"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"**

All the pain of Hell and the undiluted wrath of Almighty God were unleashed on the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He literally took our place on that cross. He died our death; He suffered our Hell; He paid our price! (III. **Eze. 18:4; Psa. 9:17; Rom 6:23.**)

Because He took the darkness of sin, we can come into the light of eternal life. Our sins were transferred to Him at the cross; when we receive Him into our hearts, His righteousness is transferred to us, **Rom. 4:16-25; Phil. 3:9!** When the Lord looks at one of the redeemed children of God, He sees one who has been made as holy, as righteous and as sinless and Jesus Himself!

Don't miss the message of the cross! If you are lost today, you are under the wrath of God, **John 3:18; 36**, and you are headed to Hell. But, you can be saved if you will come to Jesus by faith, **Rom. 10:13; John 6:37**. He will take your sins away and give you His righteousness in return!

V. A Message of Triumph out of Defeat v. 37-38

Verses 37-38 record the death of the Lord Jesus. The words of Jesus from the cross were not the words of a "**victim**" but the shouts of a "**victor**"! He did not say "**I am finished**"! He said, "**It is finished!**" When Jesus died on the cross, His death signaled the defeat of three terrible enemies of lost humanity.

After six hours on the cross, He dismissed His Spirit when He knew that the price for sin had been paid and God was eternally satisfied, III. **John 19:30**. No one killed Jesus, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death (**Phil. 2:5-8**) so that sinners might be saved. He died when it was time for Him to die, and not a second before, **John 10:17-18.**)

The death of Jesus was not the tragedy it appeared to be on the surface. The death of Jesus was our moment of ultimate triumph. In His death, He conquered all the enemies that were destroying those trapped in their sins! There truly is "**Victory In Jesus**", **1 Cor. 15:57!**

Mark tells us in verse 38, "**Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.**" The way was opened for us to come into the holy of holies, the very presence of God through the blood of Jesus.

Jesus' death was not in vain! The very day Jesus died we know from Luke that a lost thief repented, trusted and was saved, **Luke 23:40-43**. Mark also tells us that a hardened, pagan, Roman centurion officer was convicted and confessed. Verse 39 says, "**So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, 'Truly this Man was the Son of God!'**"

It was many centuries later, but His death made the difference in my life. I will never forget the day when He saved me by His grace. The salvation that He so freely extended and I so gladly received was made possible by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

What is the cross of Jesus to you? It is merely a piece of jewelry? Is it just a religious symbol? Is it a talisman you hang over your bed to keep the devil away? Is it pure foolishness? Or, is the cross the "**power of God unto salvation**"? If you will believe the message of the cross, you will find that salvation is still available. You will find that God still saves souls; changes eternal destinies and transforms sinners into saints of God.

That is the message of the cross.