

## “They Crucified Him”

### The Forty-Fifth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

*Texts: Mark 15:21-42; Psalm 22:1-31*

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Early on in his ministry, Jesus was rejected by his family. They thought he was crazy. Almost from the beginning, Jesus was rejected by the religious leadership of Israel. They thought Jesus was a blasphemer and even suspected him of being demon-possessed. Despite the masses who sought out Jesus for healing and deliverance from demons, the nation of Israel, by and large, eventually rejected Jesus once it became apparent that he was not the kind of Messiah the people wanted. And then one of Jesus’ own disciples, Judas Iscariot, betrayed Jesus to the Sanhedrin, enabling them to arrest Jesus in the dead of night, out of the public eye. And just when Jesus needed his disciples the most, they deserted him. Peter, who was the leader of the twelve, denied three times that he even knew Jesus. But this is nowhere near the end of the list of those things which our Lord willingly endured on our behalf.

After his arrest, Jesus faced a number of witnesses who were called to testify against him, and who then contradicted themselves and fabricated testimony. Despite the blatant violation of Jewish law, nevertheless Jesus was found guilty by Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. After being condemned as a blasphemer, Jesus was blindfolded, spit upon and then beaten. Then, a Roman Prefect named Pontius Pilate declared Jesus guilty, even though Pilate knew Jesus was innocent. Because Jesus remained silent before his accusers—just as Scripture had foretold—Pilate was forced to rule against him. Jesus was then flogged with a leather whip with pieces of bone and lead imbedded in each of the straps. As Jesus was led to the cross to be crucified, the soldiers assigned to guard him mocked him by placing on him a purple robe—the sign of royalty. They belittled him with the title “king of the Jews,” making light of the fact that by this point in time Jesus didn’t appear to be much of a king.

And yet the very real and horrible humiliation we have just described, pales before the humiliation Jesus is about to experience. Jesus is the only person who has ever lived after the Fall without sin. But he who knew no sin is about to “become sin,” when the guilt of our sins is imputed to him as he suffers on the cross. At that moment, Jesus will be rejected by the Father, forsaken, and accursed.

As we draw near to the end of our lengthy series on the Gospel of Mark, we now find ourselves at that very point where Jesus himself said we’d end up. Jesus had been predicting his rejection, humiliation and crucifixion from the time he and the disciples began their fateful journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. During this final journey, the disciples were slowly but surely beginning to understand that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah and that one whom God had promised to send who would liberate his people from their bondage and restore Israel’s fortunes. But like everyone else in Israel, the disciples expected the messianic kingdom to dawn in all of its glory just as soon as Jesus entered Jerusalem. No one yet understood that Jesus must first go to the cross, *if* God were to save his people from their sins. The promised glory cannot come until the cross and the suffering and humiliation of Jesus.

From our perspective, some two thousand years later, the account of Jesus’ death and resurrection is “old news” to us. We love the story of our Lord’s death and resurrection. In fact, we gladly place all our hope upon this glorious message. We preach this gospel week in and week out. But we know what the disciples do not yet know. We see Calvary in light of Easter—we know how Christ’s suffering leads to triumph in the end. But the disciples have no such point of reference, even though whenever Jesus spoke of his coming death, he also spoke of his resurrection. When Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with his

disciples, he knew full-well what was about to transpire. He knew his time had come.

That's why Jesus nearly collapsed under the burden of knowing that he must drink the cup of God's wrath as he prayed for strength in Gethsemane. Mark recounts that Jesus was terrified. But his terror was not because of the humiliation we have just described. Nor was Jesus terrified because he was afraid of the physical pain he'd experience when this came to pass—horrific as that suffering may be. Jesus prayed that the cup of wrath be taken from him because he knew that he'd become an object of the Father's wrath. Before he took upon himself a true human nature to save us from our sins, Jesus enjoyed the eternal love and joy of an inter-Trinitarian relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. It was a form of humiliation in and of itself for the second person of the blessed Trinity to take to himself a true human nature. It was humiliation beyond our comprehension when that same Jesus suddenly became sin and the object of his Father's wrath. There is no way we will ever understand this rejection of Jesus by the Father this side of heaven. But Jesus understood this, and it absolutely terrified him.

And so while the disciples struggle to understand what is happening, and then fall away just as Jesus said they would when things take an unexpected turn, meanwhile, Jesus remains obedient unto death. If Jesus did not obey the Father's will and drink the entire cup of wrath—a metaphor for his suffering upon the cross—there is no way that anyone would be saved. Let's be clear here. God is under no obligation to save any of us—we are sinners and under his just condemnation. That's at the heart of our doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. But should God decide to save any of Adam's fallen children, there was no other way to save them but through the personal obedience of Jesus throughout his entire life and through his suffering upon the cross which satisfies God's wrath and anger.

**A**s we turn to our text (the last part of Mark 15), we need to keep in mind all that has transpired leading up to this point, and how significant this event is in the grand drama of our redemption. Everything depends upon this. Everything has pointed to this.

After being delivered over to the team of soldiers who would then take Jesus to the place of execution, Jesus was no doubt bleeding profusely. A Roman flogging (a whipping with a so-called “Cat of Nine Tails”) is designed to open up a person's skin and tissue so that the person bleeds to the point where they are weakened and can put up little resistance to the crucifixion team, who must hold the person still while they drive nails into the person's wrists anchoring them to the cross-bar. While Jesus was being led away from the Praetorium after Pilate's verdict to the place of crucifixion, it is apparent that the flogging had the desired effect. In verse 21, Mark recounts how “*a certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull).*”

As a further means of humiliation, the condemned individuals were required by their executioners to carry the cross-bar upon which they would be nailed—like requiring a firing squad victim to first dig his own grave. In his weakened condition, Jesus could not walk the entire distance and at some point fell to the ground, unable to carry the heavy cross-bar. An onlooker, “Simon,” was forced into duty by the soldiers to carry Jesus' cross-bar for him. The fact that Mark mentions both this man's name and his sons, likely means that this man and his family were well-known throughout the early church. They are part of the pool of eyewitnesses, whose testimony is preserved for us in the pages of the New Testament.

Crucifixion is among the cruelest forms of capital punishment ever devised by man. The Romans were very efficient in carrying it out. It was used because it was the worst possible humiliation to heap upon one's enemies. Even in Jesus' day, crucifixion was considered so cruel that Roman citizens were

exempt, unless their crime was something like high treason. The Jewish historian Josephus describes it as “the most wretched of all ways of dying.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, our English word “excruciating” comes from this barbaric form of capital punishment. At the time of Jesus, crucifixions were performed outside the walls of Jerusalem at a place called Golgotha (“a skull”) which was a bare rocky outcrop adjacent to an intersection of two roads which entered the city through the near-by Damascus Gate.<sup>2</sup> Such a public place further humiliated the crucified—who was seen in his shame and suffering by most of those entering or leaving the city—and reminded passers-by of the power of Rome. Such crucifixions served as a very visible warning not to challenge Roman authority—especially at a time when Jewish zealots were very aggressive in their challenge to Roman rule in Judea. While the Romans regarded crucifixion as barbaric, they also saw it as a necessary evil. If that’s what it took to keep people in line, so be it.

More importantly, death by crucifixion fulfilled a very important but obscure Old Testament passage—Deuteronomy 21:23: “*you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.*” Crucifixion, as opposed to stoning, beheading or even flogging, fulfilled this biblical stipulation. Thus in this particular form of execution, Jesus becomes, as Paul says in Galatians 3:13, “accursed of God.”<sup>3</sup> Because of the horrible nature of Jesus’ death we are easily drawn away from the fact that Jesus is fulfilling many previously unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies. Even in the specific mode of his death, Jesus is showing that he is the one promised by God, and that his death has been foretold throughout the Old Testament. This means that this death was not the triumph of Rome, or even of the Sanhedrin. Jesus’ death and its exact manner was ordained by God. This is not an accident of history. It is the will of God.

When Jesus finally arrived at the place where he would save us from our sins, we read that in verses 23. “*Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.*” An old tradition indicates that this was done as an act of mercy by some of the women in Jerusalem, who offered this specially-prepared drink to all those condemned to die. The wine mixed with myrrh apparently had a strong narcotic effect and dulled the sufferer’s pain. This practice is based upon the instructions given in Proverbs 31:6-7: “*Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.*” Amazingly, Jesus refused their offer, preferring instead to face his suffering with his wits about him, rather than being dulled by the drink.

Thankfully, in the first part of verse 24, Mark simply tells us what happened. “*And they crucified him.*” Without being too graphic, this was a brutal process. When the condemned arrived at the place of crucifixion, they were in a very weakened condition. They were stripped naked and then tied to the cross with ropes or leather cords, before large nails were hammered through the lower wrist. Once the victim’s arms were securely affixed, the cross-bar was then lifted up and attached to the support beam, already firmly entrenched in the ground. At that time the person’s feet (near the heels) were nailed to the main support beam. The cross would have been “T” shaped, not “cross shaped.” Once hung upon the cross, the struggle to survive began. The cause of death was exhaustion or suffocation as the person now hung in the air was forced to fight to keep their chest and neck in a position so that they could continue to

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, Wars of the Jews, VII, v. 4.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the location, see: Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 563; and France, The Gospel of Mark, 642.

<sup>3</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 562.

breathe. When the person finally tired out—depending upon what kind of physical shape they were in—they died. Should the person still be alive by the end of the allotted time, the soldiers used a wooden beam or iron club to break the person’s lower legs above the ankle. Death came fairly quickly after that, as the person could no longer hold themselves up and manage to breathe.

As if to add insult to injury, the crucifixion team was given the crucified’s possessions. Since, in the first century, you couldn’t go to the local shopping mall and buy new clothes on a whim, such personal possessions as a tunic, belt, sandals, and head covering would be washed and then re-used. Mark says that the soldiers “*divided up his clothes, [and] they cast lots to see what each would get.*” Little did these men know that by gambling for Jesus’ clothes, they were fulfilling yet another messianic prophecy, found in Psalm 22:18 (our Old Testament lesson).<sup>4</sup> “*They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.*” Even Jesus’ few possessions are taken from him. He will certainly die in agony and pain. He is all alone. He has nothing left. He is finally nearing the depths and the end of his humiliation.

In verse 25, Mark informs us that “*it was the third hour when they crucified him.*” Mark divides his account of Jesus’ crucifixion into three hour time blocks—Jesus was found guilty at first light (about 6:00 AM), crucified three hours later at mid morning (9:00 AM), at high noon the sky turned black, Jesus died approximately three hours later, and was buried before dark (6:00 PM.) The times are approximate (no one had a watch) and are divided this way so to make it easy to memorize the sequence of events.<sup>5</sup>

Since crucifixion was a very public form of execution, it was customary for the Romans to post a notice regarding the person’s crime. The condemned often wore a sign-board around their neck when they were moved from the court to the place of death. This was yet another act of humiliation and often amounted to chalk-writing on a piece of wood, or notice burned into the wood by the tip of a hot iron rod. Once the person was crucified, that sign was nailed to the cross so everyone could see that they had done.<sup>6</sup> Hence in verse 26, we read, “*the written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.*” The sign not only mocked Jesus—i.e., that he “claimed to be king of the Jews,” but also mocked the very foundation of the Jewish hope that a Messiah would soon come. In effect, the sign was saying “here’s what we Romans think of your Jewish desire to be rid of us and free from Roman authority. This guy [Jesus] claimed to be king, and look what happened to him.” But the very fact that the Romans posted this sign, means that Jesus’ messianic claims are a fact of history and is not, as so many have argued, a claim that Jesus never made, but was put back into Jesus’ mouth by the first Christians.<sup>7</sup>

As yet another indication of the depths of Jesus’ humiliation, is that Jesus—who had done nothing wrong—is crucified between two convicted criminals, and although not recounted by Mark, one of them was about to be forgiven and will enter paradise, because in the providence of God, he was crucified next

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<sup>4</sup> Contra Cranfield, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 455. Cf. France, [The Gospel of Mark](#), 643-644; Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 566.

<sup>5</sup> France, [The Gospel of Mark](#), 626. For attempts to harmonize Mark’s time reference with that of John (Pilate pronounced sentence at noon—John 19:14), see Cranfield, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 455-456; and France, [The Gospel of Mark](#), 644-645.

<sup>6</sup> Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 567-568.

<sup>7</sup> Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 568.

to Jesus and Jesus granted him entrance into heaven before he died. According to Mark's bare-bones report, *"they crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left."* Since robbery was not a capital crime, these men must have been insurrectionists—Josephus uses the same word for "robber" of the zealots, men who were committed to armed conflict against Rome so as to free Israel from their hated oppressor.<sup>8</sup> Insurrection was a capital crime and it fit that such men would be crucified next to Jesus.

As was typical at such crucifixions, Mark also recounts how *"those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!'"* Just days before Jesus was hailed by many of these same people as Israel's great messianic hope, and now Jesus is but a gruesome spectacle, mocked by the crowds which had gathered with his own words. The whole scene recalls the words of Psalm 22:7—*"All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads."* In suffering this painful derision, Jesus is also fulfilling prophecy—a continual pattern throughout this portion of Mark's Gospel.

Pleased by the fact that Jesus (their own Messiah) was an object of ridicule, we read that *"in the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself!"* At the very least, these men had heard about Jesus' healing ministry throughout the Galilee and in Jerusalem. Some of them may have witnessed Jesus heal the sick and cast out demons first-hand. Jesus had "saved" others from their disease and sickness, and now look at him. He cannot save himself. The mocking grew all the more intense and deeply personal, *"Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe."* The Sanhedrin now mocks Jesus with his own messianic claims and the verdict of Pilate. Just as Satan had dared Jesus to avoid the struggles and temptations in the forty days in the wilderness, so now the Sanhedrin mocks Jesus to "come down now" from the cross and they will "worship him." Such irony—those who accuse Jesus of being demon-possessed, are doing the work of Satan and trying to short-circuit God's plan of redemption.

Even the two men *"crucified with him also heaped insults on him."* In Luke's Gospel, we learn that *"one of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'" Even as he hung there dying and humiliated, Jesus took pity upon a sinner, who acknowledge his sins and repented.*

**T**his must be the saddest moment in redemptive history—not the death of Jesus *per se*, as sad as that is—but the religious leaders of Israel orchestrating the death of their own Messiah and then mocking him as he dies at Roman hands. Blessedly, Jesus's humiliation is almost complete. Mark now recounts our Lord's death and burial in the balance of the chapter.

Jesus had been hanging upon the cross for about three hours. But *"at the sixth hour [noon] darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour."* You can just imagine how this effected the entire city, and those who were responsible for putting Jesus to death. Amos had prophesied that *"'In that day,' declares the Sovereign LORD, 'I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your religious feasts into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only son"*

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<sup>8</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 568.

*and the end of it like a bitter day*” (Amos 8:9 ff) Jesus’ suffering shook the entire cosmos. Darkness filled the land for three more hours until the moment Jesus died.

It was almost over. In verse 34-35, we read of how Jesus humiliation had reached its lowest ebb. That intensification of Jesus humiliation and suffering which began in Gethsemane and which Jesus dreaded so much was now a reality. *“And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’*” Once again Jesus speaks words which remind all present that his suffering was prophesied as he quotes the words of Psalm 22:1 as though he had written them and they fully applied to him. In that moment—which we will not and cannot understand until we are in heaven—Jesus was forsaken by the Father. Jesus became something accursed (Galatians 3:13). He became sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). Our guilt had been reckoned to him. He drank the cup of wrath, so that we might be forgiven through his sufferings, for us and in our place. Jesus had paid the ransom for many, just as he said he would while on his way to Jerusalem (Mark 10:45).

When calling out “Eloi, Eloi” in Aramaic—the local language and closely related to Hebrew—the crowd misunderstood him. *“When some of those standing near heard this, they said, ‘Listen, he’s calling Elijah.’”* Since Elijah was taken up to heaven, Jews widely thought he was some kind of helper in time of need—similar to the Roman Catholic notion of appealing to patron saints.<sup>9</sup> Trying to relieve Jesus’ suffering, *“one man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink.”* But others wanted to see if Jesus’ supposed cry to Elijah would bring about his rescue. *“Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said.”*

Finally, it was blessedly over. Mark reports in verse 37, that *“with a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.”* Jesus’ humiliation was over, but Israel’s tragedy was just beginning. At the very moment Jesus died, *“The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”* The “Holy of holies”—that place where the high priest alone could enter once a year on the Day of Atonement—was immediately rendered “Icabod.” The glory of the Lord has departed from the temple. Why? The final, once for all sacrifice for sin had been made. Everything to which the entire Old Testament sacrificial system pointed was now fulfilled. The earthly temple, which was a visible representation of the heavenly temple, was immediately rendered obsolete. It had served its purpose, but with the death of Jesus’ its day was over.

The death of Jesus must have set off shock-waves throughout all of Jerusalem. The reactions were many and diverse. One of the Roman officers who superintended the death of Jesus, immediately recognized Jesus’ identity and apparently embraced the gospel. Mark says that *“when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’”* And then there were the women, who bravely stayed with Jesus to the end. *“Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.”* These women had been with Jesus from the beginning. Unlike the disciples, they were there until the bitter end. What faith and courage!

Jesus’ death set off another flurry of events—he needed to be buried in accordance with Jewish law. According to Mark, *“it was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he*

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<sup>9</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 459.

*was already dead.”* The death of Jesus was already bearing eternal fruit—even in the moments right after it occurred. One criminal had already believed and was in paradise. The centurion confessed that Jesus was the Son of God and may have believed when he saw Jesus die. And now Joseph, who was himself a member of the Sanhedrin, apparently believed in Jesus as well. Pilate, who was probably sorry that he’d ever seen Jesus, readily did what Joseph asked. *“Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When [Pilate] learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph.”*

Following Jewish custom and law and ensuring that Jesus was buried before sundown, the elaborate Jewish burial procedures were quickly followed as the body was prepared for internment. *“So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.”*

Jesus was now dead and buried. The Sanhedrin was finally rid of him. Although the entire city had rocked by a great earthquake (Matthew 27:51) and the skies showed that Jesus’ death had cosmic significance, people certainly thought it was all over. But it was only just beginning. They crucified him. But death and the grave are no match for the power of God.

**W**ell, what is there to say?

This is the critical moment to which this entire gospel has been pointing us. Jesus’ death upon the cross was the fulfillment of countless Old Testament prophecies, as well as the only means by which the Holy God can forgive us of our sins. The cross was no accident, and while tragic, is in no sense a tragedy. The suffering and dying of Jesus is God’s means of saving us from our sins. There is no other way.

Through Mark’s “nothing but the facts” account of Jesus’ suffering and dying, we have seen what horrible things Jesus endured. Now we know why Jesus did this—to save all those trust in him and repent of their sins. Therefore, the central theme of Mark’s Gospel is Jesus’ obedience and suffering to fulfill God’s righteous demands and to provide a once for payment for our sins.

With that, the moment of decision has come for any here who do not yet trust Jesus to save you from your sins. The death of Jesus demands that same response given by the criminal, the centurion, Joseph and the women who followed him—the recognition that Jesus is the Son of God who can save us from our sins, if only we trust in him.

To reject this message is to place yourself among those disappointed multitudes in Jerusalem who thought Jesus got what he deserved because he was not what their sinful desires thought he should be. To reject Jesus is to take the side of the Sanhedrin. It is to stand with those mocking Jesus in his sufferings upon the cross. To reject Jesus now is to risk coming face to face with the Holy God on the day of judgment without the death of Jesus standing between you and him. I can think of nothing worse.

But to those of you who trust in Jesus, look to his sufferings and know that your sins are forgiven! He did this for us and in our place.