

The Final Hours: Death
Pastor Ashley Brown
Wasilla Bible Church
May 11, 2008

We are gonna be in the last chapter...or excuse me, not the last chapter, second to the last chapter...of Mark today. Mark 15:15-39. We aren't gonna go all the way through the end of chapter 15, and you'll see part of the reason why next week. But, in case you haven't been here in the last few weeks, or maybe you've forgotten, just wanna paint a little bit of a picture of where we're at in the gospel of Mark. You see, we've been spending this whole year traveling through the gospel of Mark so that that way we could better understand who Jesus is, what He said, what He did, so that we can speak accurately, truthfully, appropriately of who Jesus is to people that we encounter; so that we can better follow Him in life. Because if we want to be Christians, if we want to be followers of Christ, what that entails is actually following Christ; it entails living the life He would have us lead. And the reason, the motivation behind that is in the gospel.

But where we've been over the last few weeks is we've been looking at the final hours of Jesus' life. This is kind of the final twenty-four hours, and it's something that we really need to pay attention to, because of the reason that Mark only has sixteen chapters; and of those sixteen chapters two of them—so one eighth of the whole book of Mark—focus on the last twenty-four hours of Jesus' life. So Mark apparently thinks that this is very, very important. In fact, this is at the heart of what Christianity is about. This is the heart of why Jesus came.

And what we saw a few weeks ago is that there was the preparation. Jesus was preparing Himself and His disciples for His upcoming death. And then there was the betrayal, where Jesus was betrayed by one of His own friends, one of His own disciples in the garden. And by the end of that night, by the end of that betrayal period, every one of His friends had turned their back on Him and ran; and He was left alone, abandoned in the midst of His enemies. And then last week we looked at the trial, and what was it that Jesus was condemned for. And we found that really what it was is He was condemned because He actually had the audacity to claim that He was the Messiah, the Son of God, the Son of Man.

And that brings us to where we are today. What ends up happening is Pilate has condemned Him to death, to be flogged and to be crucified. And that's what we're gonna be talking about today, is the death of Jesus. And so we're gonna start reading in Mark 15:16. And it says this—

Then the soldiers led Him away...

...Jesus...

Then the soldiers led Him away into the courtyard (that is, Headquarters), and called the whole company together. They dressed Him in a purple robe, twisted together a crown of thorns, and put it on Him. And they began to salute Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They kept hitting Him on the head with a reed, and spitting on Him; getting down on their knees, they were paying Him homage.

When they had mocked Him, they stripped Him of the purple robe, put His clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him. They forced a man coming in from the country, who was passing by, to carry Jesus' cross. He was Simon, a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus. And they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha, which means 'skull place.'

They tried to give Him wine mixed with myrrh, but He did not take it. Then they crucified Him and divided His clothes, casting lots for them to decide what each would get. Now, it was nine in the morning when they crucified Him.

Your bible will...we're pausing for just a moment...your bible may say that it was the third hour. The reason there is just because the day, the Roman day, started at six. So

Now, it was nine in the morning when they crucified Him. The inscription of the charge written against Him was 'King of the Jews'. They crucified two criminals with Him, one on His right and one on His left. So the scripture was fulfilled which says, "And He was counted among the outlaws."

Those who passed by were yelling insults at Him, shaking their heads and saying, "Ha! The one who would demolish the sanctuary and build it in three days. Save Yourself by coming down from the cross!"

And in the same way the chief priests with the scribes were mocking Him to one another and saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. 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 were taunting Him.

When it was noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three, Jesus cried out with a loud voice,

"Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?"

which is translated "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "Look, He is calling out for Elijah." Someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, fixed it on a reed, offered Him a drink, and said, "Let's see if Elijah comes to take Him down."

But Jesus let out a loud cry and breathed His last. Then the curtain of the sanctuary was split in two from top to bottom.

When the centurion who was standing opposite Him saw the way He breathed His last, he said, "This man really was God's Son."

Let's pray.

Lord God,

I do ask that as we dive into this text that You would help us see the truth of Your word, that we would have eyes and ears to see and to hear, that we would have minds to understand it, and that we would have hearts that will be changed and will hold onto it, that our lives would be transformed.

We pray this in Your name, amen.

As we look at this I've really struggled with how do I share with you and preach through this. It's a very...it's a very simple passage. It's one that is pretty plain, but really I think that much of the meaning of it, much of the significance, much of the gruesome nature of it, is lost on us because we live in such a sheltered society. We haven't seen crucifixion. We haven't seen the sort of brutality that there is in here. And I don't wanna dwell on that because, in all honesty, I can't paint an accurate picture that would give you a vivid enough mental image of exactly what happened here.

What I will say is this...I think, as I look through this and as I read what Jesus went through—the floggings, the beatings, being mocked, being crucified, basically being tortured to death—the only thing that I have ever encountered that I think comes at all close is when I've been in the mountains of Afghanistan, and you go into a village and find out that the night prior Al Qaida or the Taliban had come in and made an example of someone who had cooperated with the Americans; and just the sheer brutality that one person can inflict on another is astounding.

You see, Jesus, when He was crucified...crucifixion was just a gruesome, gruesome thing. And not only that, but he had been flogged. People often died just from flogging. Oftentimes, when someone would be flogged, you know, you could see the internal organs from the outside. You could basically have an anatomy lesson as you were standing there looking at them. And Jesus had gone through this. And not only this, but He is up on the cross; and it's amazing to me that He even says anything; simply because of the fact that He had already been through so much that I can't see how a human body can take it. And then He's standing here, and they've driven the...or He's hanging here, and they've driven these nails between the bones of His wrists and through the heels of His feet, nailing Him to this cross, and He's hanging here. And just to even breathe He has to press on these nails and pull up on them with all the strength in His body just to catch a breath, or especially if He wants to speak before He loses His strength and falls back down, hanging from these nails.

People who were crucified typically ended up dying...a lot of times they would die from a couple of different things. It would take a few days, a lot of times. They would die of exposure, or a lot of times what it was was finally they became so weak that they couldn't lift themselves up anymore, and so they would just suffocate, and they would drown in their own bodily fluids and internal bleeding.

And I'm sharing this not because I want to just impact you with the gruesome nature of this, but because of the fact that it makes it all the more powerful what Jesus says on the cross. It was important enough for Him to expend His last ounces of strength to say something that we needed to hear and to remember. And the thing that sticks out to me, in Mark's gospel and the words that Mark records, is this. The words that Mark records from the cross is this: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

A lot of people would look at this...there's a lot of people nowadays who would look at this and say, 'See, this is proof that Jesus was just a man; He wasn't God.' They would look at it and say, 'See...' Well, an example...I mentioned Bart Ehrman. He was a professor of mine at UNC some years ago, and he writes a bunch of books. And he is writing about this, he's writing about Mark, and this is what he says. He takes the attitude that 'it seems that Jesus, at the end of His life, is actually in the throes of doubt. After all, He's saying "Why have You forsaken Me?"' Sad thing is this...Bart Ehrman, because he is so skeptical and because he's so...he's so caught up on being skeptical of the gospel that he has missed the last sermon that Jesus ever preached before He died.

See, there is somethin' here that is just amazing to me. We've talked a bit about...and I'm gonna explain here...Jesus was not in the throes of doubt. He never doubted His faith whatsoever. He never lost faith. He never doubted who He was, who the Father is, and exactly what the Father's plan was. We've mentioned how, in the first century Jewish culture, they didn't have, everybody didn't have their own little bible so they could open it up and search through and try to figure out where that verse was they wanted to call to mind. No...what happened was they were immersed in it, and they recited it over and over and over and over, so that that way it was just a part of the way that they thought, that they spoke, that they communicated. And they could say a simple thing and it would call to mind a whole list of things with it. And the thing that I look at, and I look at this, and this is a powerful, powerful thing to me because here's the thing...we don't know exactly how Jesus said it, what His tone of voice was. I have a suspicion, but may have been something different from what Bart Ehrman thinks it was. And here is why. This is the first line of Psalm 22, the first line of Psalm 22.

Picture this with me. Jesus is hanging here on the cross; He is being mocked. The teachers have just said, 'If you're really the Messiah, prove it. Come on down; save Yourself. Let us see if You're the Messiah!' And Jesus' response is this. He says, "*My God, My God, Why have You forsaken Me?*" knowing that these people will automatically...that they will be able to go back and they will look at it. And what they see...Psalm 22...we're gonna go over it just real quick here. And I've boiled it down, because we don't have time to go through the entire thing. But basically it starts off like this:

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?

And it goes on...

Everyone who sees me, mocks me. My bones are disjoined; my heart is like wax melting within me. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. They have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all of my bones. People look, and they stare at me. They divided my garments among themselves, and they cast lots for my clothing.

The moment that they hear, "*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*" they can look. And all of a sudden they look around and they hear the mocking voices as people are mocking Jesus. They see that, yes, they have pierced His hands and His feet. They can look and they see these Roman soldiers over there casting lots for His garment to figure out who gets what piece. They can see the fact that as He's hanging here His joints are becoming dislocated, and He's hanging and totally extended, and He's just gruesomely beaten. And you can see the bones of His body. And He says, 'You know what? You say I'm not the Messiah? Look at this. Read it. You look it up and you tell me if I'm the Messiah.'

But see, here's the thing. Psalm 22 doesn't just end there. That's the awesome and awful part of the gospel, is this right here. But what happens is Psalm 22 doesn't just end there in this hopeless despair. It goes on and it turns a page. And what ends up happening is it goes on and it says

“But You, Lord, don’t be far from me. You have rescued me. I will proclaim Your name to my brothers. You who fear the Lord, praise Him.”

Here Jesus is; He doesn’t have the strength to pull Himself up and preach a whole sermon. Instead, He says this. He says, ‘Check out Psalm 22. You can see that this is what I’m about.’ And Psalm 22, it goes on; and He says, ‘This may be happening; this may be where I’m at right now; but as for Me I know that the Lord will rescue Me. My Father will rescue Me, whether or not it seems like that right now. He will rescue Me. And so I will tell you, my brothers—anybody who fears the Lord, this is My message.’

And it goes on, and it says,

“All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord.”

They will come, and they will tell the people yet to be born about His righteousness, what He has done. You see Jesus, He was sittin’ here. And as we saw in Isaiah 52 and 53 as we kinda talked about it a few weeks ago, Jesus in the midst of His anguish looked out, and He saw us. He saw you, He saw me, and He said, ‘You know what? If I have to go through this, and I have to go through all of this anguish, it’s still worth it. I’m satisfied with the knowledge that they will be made whole through My sacrifice.’

What Jesus says is, it’s calling to mind...Psalm 22, what it’s saying is, ‘You know what? There are people yet to be born who will hear about what the Lord has done. And they will praise the name of the Lord because of what He has done.’ And in the midst of His dying on the cross, Jesus was thinking of you and of me; and He said, ‘If you can say that I’m not the Messiah all you want, this is My answer to you. Yeah, you may look at it, and you may think that I am broken and battered and My spirit is gone, but I tell you this—I will not save Myself. Why? So that I can tell those, my brothers, the people who will believe in the Lord, that God has done a great and mighty thing for them. And for years to come, for generations to come, people will know and they will hear; and all the nations of the world, all the peoples of the earth, will be blessed because of what is going on here, now. And so I will not come down to save Myself. My Father has already rescued Me.’

What it ends up telling us is that, you know, shortly after this time Jesus dies. He cries out one last thing, which is basically, “It is finished.” And He dies. That happens; Mark tells us that the curtain in the temple, in the sanctuary, was torn in two from top to bottom. And that’s a significant thing, because you see up to this point, in that temple complex, there was a place called the Holy of Holies. And this is where God’s presence was said to dwell. And only one person, the high priest, could enter this place—one time a year, and only after all the proper cleansing ritual sacrifices and everything else could he come into the actual presence of God. And it could only happen once a year. And God, at the moment of Jesus’ sacrifice, He ripped that open and He said, ‘Now, nobody else has to come in here through this way. My presence is now available to anyone and everyone. The sacrifice has been paid. There is nothing else to do. It’s done. My presence is available to all. You don’t have to be some high priest who can only come in here once a year, and only after a certain amount of ritual cleansing and everything else. My presence is available to everyone. Why? Because the sacrifice has been paid.’

There’s an amazing thing that I look at here. There’s this centurion. Centurion is kinda like a first sergeant or sergeant major, sort of thing, in the army. There’s this guy who’s worked his way up through the ranks. Who knows how many people he has seen die, whether it’s his own men in some battle, or others—the people that they’re fighting. Who knows how many crucifixions that he has actually officiated over? But when he looks at Jesus, and when he watches Jesus die on the cross, he looks at him. And when he sees it he says, ‘If anybody really is who he says he is...I’ve seen lots of death in my time.’ But when he sees Jesus’ death, he says, ‘This man surely...surely this man was the Son of God.’ There was something different about the way that Jesus died. He didn’t die pleading for his life. He didn’t die in the throes of doubt, as Bart Ehrman would like to suspect. He died very confident of exactly who He was and what He was doing, and why He was doing it. That is both the awful reality and the beautiful grace of the gospel.

You see, there’s a couple points of application here. Gonna be similar to what we’ve been talkin’ about over the last few weeks. If you are a Christian here, well the first point of application I would tell you is this—don’t let anybody ever tell you that Jesus lost His faith. That is a ridiculous notion. It’s a ridiculous notion that evidences the fact that someone does not yet understand the Bible, and does not yet understand how it all ties together and what Jesus was doing. The more important point of application is this. If you’re a Christian, if you’re a follower of Christ, what Jesus says is, ‘Guess what? It’s been paid. That curtain has been ripped open and you now have direct access to God Himself. You don’t have to sacrifice anything; you don’t have to earn His favor or anything else.

As we've talked about in the last few weeks, there is an infinite debt that you owed, because you... It's this math equation. If you reject the source of life, the author of life, the giver of life, if you reject life itself, the natural consequence is death. It's a simple math equation. If you push life away, death is the absence of life, and that is what you get. And what ends up happening is, because doing that, He is the infinite source of goodness and beauty, of justice, of everything right and good and perfect in the world; and because He is an infinite source of that, what that also means is that to push Him away and to rebel against Him is an infinite dishonor. Jesus is the one who made it possible for that infinite debt of honor to be paid. Don't take it for granted. Don't worry about trying to pay Him back. Don't worry about tryin' to pay Jesus back, because here's the beauty of the gospel—you can't. You can't! We can't do anything do earn it, no matter how much you do to earn your way towards an infinite thing, you're never gonna be any closer. No matter what you do to try and earn God's favor, guess what? Because there is an infinite amount owed, then what ends up happening is you take two or three, four, five, six, a hundred steps that way—it doesn't matter because you still have an infinite ways to go. You can't do it. But that's the beauty of the gospel. Jesus can, and He's done that for you. Don't take it for granted. Realize the fact that you've been bought with His life, and revel in the beauty of that. He thought that it was worth it. He could have saved Himself. But He hung there so that 'us', that we, could hear about it generations to come, yet to be born, and so that we could know God.

If you're here today, and you are not a follower of Christ, if you're not a Christian, then the application is simply this—it's very similar. No matter what you do, you will never be able to pay off the debt of honor that you owe; because, see, the moment that you reject God, the moment that you don't give Him the amount of honor that is owed, you have just done an infinite dishonor. It's kinda...we made that analogy a week or two ago about, you know, if somebody wrongly awards a little ribbon to the kid at the track meet down at Tanaina Elementary, you know, ok that's dishonor; that's sad, and everything else. But now, if you were to do the same thing and you wrongly give the gold medal at the Olympics to the wrong nation or to the wrong person, then there is going to be international scandal, outrage; it's going to be all over the networks and everything else. And the only difference between the two is the amount of honor that is owed to that person, and the amount of dishonor done by it; because the dishonor and the scandal is proportionate to the amount of honor owed to that person.

So if there is an infinite amount of honor owed to God, then it is an infinite scandal when we don't do it. We will never be able to pay it off. But Jesus can. And the reason that He can is what we talked about last week. He is the Messiah. He is the one who is both God and Man in one. He is the only one who can stand in my place as a human being and pay the debt for me. As a human, He could come in and He could stand in my place, one human life for another human life. As God, He was the only one who could say, 'You know what? I will pay this death. But because I am God, I have an infinite nature and so in this sacrifice I can pay an infinite death.' He could do in moments what would take me an eternity to not even make a dent in, simply because of the difference in our natures.

The beauty of the gospel is this—if you're a sinner and you are willing to say, 'You know what? I screw up, and I am not going to be able to get it right; I cannot get it right and earn God's favor on my own. I can't do it,' Jesus says, 'Here's the deal. You give Me your sin and I'll give you My forgiveness and My life. That's the deal.' And that's the beauty of it. He says 'You give Me your sin, I will pay your price, I will pay your debt; and then from here on out guess what? It's done. But I've bought you. You're mine and nobody else's.' That's the gospel, if we are willing to go to Him and say, 'I need Your help. I can't do it. Forgive me. I trust that You have paid my sacrifice, my debt.'

In just a moment I'm gonna pray, and after we do we're gonna have...we just have this area up here called the 'Prayer Zone.' It's just if you wanna pray about anything, if you want to talk to somebody, if you have some concerns and comments, questions, anything else, please feel free to come up here and talk to one of us up here. There will be a couple pastors, elders, some people up here to talk to you. We'd love to talk to you guys. Could you please stand.

Lord God,

I do thank You for the fact that in the midst of the cross You were thinking of us. Lord God, I thank You for the fact that You've made it possible for our infinite debt to be paid. And God, I ask that You would not allow us to take that lightly; that we would be transformed by that truth, and that You would... that You truly would make us different people, and that You would make us to be in Your image, so that we would have life and have a relationship with You.

God, I pray this in Your name, amen.