

May 10, 2026

THE DEATH OF JESUS AND THE BEGINNING OF THINGS TO COME

Mark 15:21-47

(14 of 15 in a series through Mark 10-16)

At 9:00 in the morning on an April day, somewhere between AD 30-33, Jesus of Nazareth was nailed to a Roman cross. By 3:00 in the afternoon he would breathe his last and die. Perhaps most non-Christian historians would agree with those details. But at that point, their understanding and ours would diverge greatly. For them, Jesus' death was like any other. Maybe they would speak of the tragedy of his death, as he was wrongly accused of being some great threat to Rome. And certainly, they would note the agony of his death, as crucifixion was such a horrible form of execution that many didn't even like to speak the word. But for us, Jesus' death is so much more than a detail of history. It's certainly not less than that. For Christianity, history matters. We believe that Jesus lived, died, and rose in history. The cross is not less than a historical detail, but it's much more. For us, the cross is our salvation. It's become the symbol that believers point to, ordain our church buildings with, or even wear as jewelry. And this isn't inappropriate, as some might recoil at the idea of ordaining our buildings with an instrument of execution, because we know that the cross is our hope. Without it there is no salvation. The cross is at the center of our hope as believers. And Mark reminds us of that in Mark 15:21-47.

At this point in our next to last sermon in Mark's gospel, we have finally made it to the crucifixion. And as for details about the nature of the execution itself, Mark gives us very little. He actually reduces it to three words, as he notes in verse 25, "They crucified him." But reading the rest of the verses, there is much Mark wants us to recognize about the nature of what happened as Jesus was crucified. I want to note three. First, everything was taking place according to God's foretold plan.

Jesus was fulfilling God's foretold plan

This is the first truth we need to recognize about this whole story. In fact, the first argument we can make against someone who thinks that Jesus' death meant his defeat, or something he never anticipated, or simply an accident of history is to note that the details of Jesus' death were foretold in Scripture. We've already seen that with Jesus' trial and how it parallels Isaiah 53. But in these verses, we see the fulfillment of Psalm 22 as David, being a prophet, spoke of his experience as a shadow of what his Lord would experience in full.

Just listen to the words of Psalm 22 and compare what is happening here. Psalm 22 opens with the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" which are the very words that Jesus cries out from the cross in verse 34. Now, someone might counter that by saying, "Sure, but that was in Jesus' control." In other words, Jesus could have said that simply to act like what is happening was foretold in Psalm 22. But that argument ends when you get to Psalm 22:6-8. There, we read, "All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; 'He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!" which lines up

with the events of Mark 15:29-32, as Mark writes, “And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying . . . ‘Save yourself, and come down from the cross!’ . . . ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself.’” And that, obviously, involves the actions of others. But that’s not all. In Psalm 22:16, David writes, “They pierced my hands and feet,” something that we know happened with the crucifixion. And, finally, in Psalm 22:18, David had written, “They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots,” while Mark tells us in verse 24, “And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them.”

This past semester in my class at Union, I had a student who asked about Jesus’ cry about being forsaken by God—something I’ll go into more detail about shortly. And as I began answering the question, I started out noting that Jesus was echoing the words of Psalm 22:1. Anyway, I went on lecturing, and unbeknownst to me, that student started reading Psalm 22 as I was lecturing. Then, at the end of class, the student said to the rest of the class, “If you guys haven’t read Psalm 22, you need to. It’s amazing how exact it is.” And he’s right. If you started with the cross and worked backwards, writing Psalm 22 after the events of Jesus’ death in order to make it look like it was foretold, we’d probably not make it so exact. So, that’s where we must start. Jesus’ death was no accident of history or something he didn’t anticipate or couldn’t control. It’s the fulfillment of God’s redeeming plan. Everything plays out in this scene just as God planned. But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t painful or terrible. In fact, Jesus suffers here worse than any of us ever will, and I say that because Jesus was suffering nothing less than divine wrath.

Jesus was suffering divine wrath for sinners

Jesus’ suffering in these verses is great. First, as was custom, the one being executed would often be made to carry his own cross beam. The vertical stake on which that would be attached was already in the ground, but this horizontal beam would be attached to it, and the victim’s hands would be tied or nailed to it. In Jesus’ case, we know he was nailed to that beam. Well, Jesus, having been whipped and beaten already is obviously too weak to carry it, and so one of the first things Mark tells us is that they draft a man, Simon of Cyrene, to carry Jesus’ cross for him (v. 21). So, his suffering has already been great, but this is only the beginning.

Crucifixion was an excruciating way to die, as the victim would have to hoist himself up to breathe, and eventually as he would get too weak to do so, he would suffocate and die. That’s the death Jesus died. And, as we have already noted in the prior weeks, he died alone. His disciples had fled from him. And if that were it, that Jesus would have to face this excruciating death alone, that would be terrible, but that is not all that took place. He was continually mocked.

Every person in this scene derides and mocks Jesus. The inscription above his head—“The King of the Jews”—was meant to mock him (v. 26). The two men crucified on his right and on his left reviled him (v. 32). Passersby derided him, mocking him for saving others but apparently not being able to save himself (vv. 29-30). The chief priests and scribes mocked him, saying similar things (vv. 31-32). He died deserted by his friends and mocked by his enemies. And yet, that

doesn't come close to the most excruciating reality of what he experienced on the cross. Jesus bore on the cross the wrath of God.

In verse 34 Mark tells us that Jesus cried out from the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (v. 34). That can kind of sound like "Eli, Eli," and so some mistakenly thought he was calling for Elijah to come rescue him. There were all kinds of legendary thoughts about Elijah because he hadn't died in the Old Testament but had been whirled away into heaven in a chariot of fire. And so some believed that Elijah could continue to come and rescue us in our time of need. Others noted that Elijah was to precede the Messiah, so perhaps this was the moment—though Jesus told us that this had already been fulfilled in the coming of John the Baptist.

The reality is that Jesus wasn't calling for Elijah at all. The phrase "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" had nothing to do with Elijah. Rather, Mark translates it for us, telling us that Jesus was saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (v. 34). But what do we make of that? Why would Jesus ask his Father why he had forsaken him? Was Jesus really forsaken?

Well, let's consider a few things. First, Jesus is God the Son incarnate. What I mean is that Jesus is God the Son, but he's God the Son having assumed a fully human nature. That's why we say that he's the *God-man*. And as the *God-man*, Jesus could experience things that couldn't be true of God. For example, Jesus got hungry and tired, while we know that God needs nothing and does not sleep or slumber. So, Jesus would experience need and have to sleep, experiencing life as a man. This is also why Jesus could die. God can't die. But man can. This is why Hebrews 2:9, in referring to the incarnation, tells us that the Son was for a little while made lower than the angels so that he might taste death. In other words, one key reason the Son assumed a fully human nature was so that he might die.

Well, similarly, in his death, as the *God-man*, Jesus becomes the sin offering for us. He becomes the one who bears the divine punishment for sin. And that's exactly how we need to understand this. The rest of the Scripture that foretold of this moment isn't shy that Jesus is bearing the wrath of God himself. In Isaiah 53:10 we read: "Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; *he* has put him to grief." One chapter earlier in Mark, Jesus had foretold the disciples' abandonment of him, saying, "It is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'" (Mark 14:25). When he said that, he was quoting Zechariah 13:7, and it is clear from that text that the "I" Jesus was referencing as the one who would strike him is "The LORD of hosts." Jesus, as the *God-man*, is experiencing on the cross, the full, merciless wrath of God for sinners. He's not experiencing the full blessings of his Father in that moment but the curse of God. That's why he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" As John Murray has written, "We almost hesitate to say so. But it must be said. It is God in our nature forsaken of God."¹ That is, it is God, having assumed a fully human nature, who is forsaken of God in his humanity. This is what Paul is talking about when he tells us in Romans 8:32 that God "did not spare his own Son."

¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 77.

In Jesus' human mind, body, and soul, he was experiencing the fullness of God's wrath in all of its agony. We also know this because of the darkness that covered the land from noon to 3:00 PM, mentioned in verse 33. Darkness throughout the Old Testament is a sign of God's judgment. For example, as God gave the blessings that would accompany obedience in Deuteronomy 28, he gave the curses that would accompany disobedience, and he said in 28:28-29, "The Lord will strike you . . . and you shall grope at noonday, as the blind grope in darkness." Jesus was bearing the wrath of God. The wrath of God deserved by people like you and I who have gossiped, borne false witness, coveted what others had, committed sexual immorality, committed adultery, hated and murdered, have chased after fame and greed, have loved ourselves and hated God—that wrath, was borne by Jesus. The wrath of God that will be shown when unrepentant sinners are thrown into the lake of fire on the last day is the wrath of God that Jesus experienced on the cross. As Scripture pictures it as the cup of the wine of God's wrath, we can say that Jesus drank it down in full.

Brothers and sisters, this is the reason we're not condemned if our faith is in Christ. It's not because we don't deserve that wrath. We do. It's because Jesus bore it for us and exhausted it on our behalf. He took the fullness of what my sins and yours deserved. God demanded perfect righteousness and wrath against any sin. And God fulfilled both of his own demands on our behalf in the person of his Son. Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life in our place and then, on the cross, bore the fullness of wrath for our sins. That's what's going on at the cross. Is it any wonder, then, why Jesus would have prayed, asking his Father to let this cup pass from him? Is there any wonder why Jesus would ask if there was any other way? But there wasn't. Ironically, as many mocked him, saying, "Save yourself," the only reason he couldn't save himself is because if he had, he couldn't have saved us. Again, there was no other way. On the cross we see the wrath of God, and only when we recognize that can we begin to see the love of God as clearly as we should. The Father sent his Son in love for us, and the Son willingly died in love for us. And let us never miss how costly this love and our forgiveness was. Jesus bore the wrath of God for you and me. That's why he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" So, don't miss this in the midst of the agony of what Jesus was experiencing. He died so that he might bring the blessings of salvation to his people, which is the last point I want us to dwell on.

Jesus was bringing about the blessings of salvation to his people

Interestingly, in the midst of this terrible scene, we see constant reminders of God's saving grace. First, did you notice that after Mark mentioned that Simon of Cyrene was drafted to help carry Jesus' cross that he identified him as "the father of Alexander and Rufus"? Now, why do that? I think the most likely answer is that Alexander and Rufus were known to the Christians in the first century because they were believers. These men had become well-known members of the church.

But it doesn't stop there. After Jesus dies, we read, "And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God!' (v. 39). Here you have the unlikeliest of individuals to profess that Jesus is the Son of God. The centurion was the very one in charge of executing Jesus. In fact, when Pilate later wanted to

know if Jesus had died, he summoned this very centurion to make sure that was the case (v. 44). So, here, you have the very man who executed Jesus—a Roman centurion—confessing that he’s the Son of God.

And, finally, you have Joseph of Arimathea. Mark notes that he was “a respected member of the council” (v. 43), by which he means the Sanhedrin—the group of chief priests, scribes, and elders who had condemned Jesus. John tells us in his gospel that Joseph had kept his commitment to Jesus secret to this point for fear of the Jews (John 19:38), but you can’t be a follower of Jesus and not go public with it, and so here he does. Mark tells us that he “took courage” and went and asked Pilate for Jesus’ body so that he might bury him in his tomb. And this was indeed risky. You don’t want to risk being identified with one charged with treason against Rome. But Joseph found the courage to do so, and he buries Jesus in his tomb—as some women saw where Jesus was buried—setting the scene for Sunday morning.

So, as Jesus is experiencing this darkest of moments, we see the reality for which he died coming about. We see disciples made from the unlikeliest of situations—children of a man drafted to help Jesus, a Roman centurion, and a member of the Sanhedrin. And these would just be a foretaste of what’s to come as the book of Acts and the last 2,000 years show us disciples coming from every tongue, tribe, and nation.

And it’s worth stopping and letting this weigh on us. Have you ever thought that someone was unlikely to be converted simply because of who they are or what situation they’re in? Well, it can’t get more unlikely than this centurion or a member of the Sanherdrin. Salvation is a miracle, and God delights in working this miracle. So, let’s never say to ourselves, “I just don’t think he/she can be saved!” When you think that, remember this scene and these unlikely converts.

But there is another saving blessing Jesus’ death brings that is clear in our text. In verse 38 we’re told that after Jesus breathes his last, “The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”

In order to see the significance, we need to note a couple of things. First, this curtain wasn’t like the kind of curtains we’re familiar with. The historian, Josephus, said it was about sixty feet tall, thirty feet wide, and three to four inches thick. So, this was a miracle, and it was a miracle no man had pulled off, seeing that it was torn from top to bottom. Second, this specific curtain (based on the book of Hebrews) was the curtain that marked off the most holy place in the temple, where the Lord allowed his presence to dwell.

Now, the reason it’s important that we recognize that it was this specific curtain that separated off the most holy place is because no one had access to that room in the temple except for one person—the high priest—and even then, he’d only go into that room one time a year. He’d go in wearing twelve stones to show that he represented the twelve tribes of Israel, and he’d offer sacrifices and intercede for the people.

Therefore, the fact that this curtain was torn was the Lord's way of saying that Jesus' death has opened access whereby each of us can approach God ourselves, coming into his presence. Here's what the author of Hebrews says: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Heb 10:19-22).

That is, all of us can approach God directly in prayer through our great high priest, Jesus Christ. That is what that moment symbolized. Our Father is saying, "Approach me with full confidence if you're trusting in my Son." That's what Jesus' death accomplished in that moment. And so, this moment where our Lord underwent horrendous agony in bearing the wrath of God for us, he does so in order that his saving blessings might come to all who would believe so that we might live our lives, approached our Lord in prayer in full assurance. What a blessing!

It's hard to allow ourselves to think about Jesus' death, perhaps. It's horrendous. There's never been a more vile act committed by sinful humanity than crucifying the Lord of glory. And yet, no one took Jesus' life from him. This was God's foretold plan. In love, he sent his Son into the world in order that Jesus might bear the wrath of God that we deserved so that we might never face it ourselves. Rather, instead of bearing God's wrath, as we've certainly merited it, we can be saved, forgiven of our sins, given eternal life, adopted as God's children, and invited to approach him continually in prayer through our high priest, Jesus Christ. May we be faithful to do so even now as we come to the table. Amen.