

MARK 15

BACKGROUND

- In this chapter there are three key players with whom Jesus deals:
 - a. *The religious authorities. They don't think he's the Messiah, and his idea of the kingdom of God challenged their privileged position. However, to do away with him they needed to manipulate the crowd and the Roman governor, Pilate.*
 - b. *The civil authorities. Pilate is in Jerusalem to monitor the influx of pilgrims for the Passover and to prevent uprising. Also fearing the crowd, he doesn't act unilaterally. No love is lost between him and the religious authorities—he is happy to use the idea of Jesus' kingship to taunt them (15:12).*
 - c. *The crowd. They clamor for blood, but with no clear sense of purpose or direction, and are aptly handled by the religious authorities.*
- Mark has at this point in the Gospel account laid out the purpose of Jesus' death, and made clear that this death is Jesus' plan:

Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Mk 10:45)

As a result, this chapter is stark in its brevity, Mark not needing to comment on the significance of the crucifixion.

- *Wine mixed with myrrh (23) is thought to have been a narcotic to ease the pain of the dying.*
- *"The area around Jerusalem in Jesus' time has been described as a gigantic cemetery. The tomb of Joseph was a cavelike structure cut out of limestone and sealed with a large, circular rock. The corpse would be laid out on a shelf cut out of the rock and allowed to decompose for a year. Then the bones would be gathered and placed in a bone-box ('ossuary')"* (Jerome p. 628, 107.46).

QUESTIONS

1. Based on the suffering servant passage Is 53 and other similar OT scriptures it was argued that the Messiah had to suffer. And many a fair-minded Jew would have granted this point. In the words of the 2nd-century Jew Trypho, having argued this point with Justin, "It is quite clear that the scriptures announce that Christ had to suffer... We know that he should suffer and be led as a sheep." So much was agreed. But Trypho spoke for all Jews when he voiced objection to the manner of Jesus' death: "...But to prove to us whether he must be crucified and die so disgracefully and so dishonorably the death accursed in the Law—For we cannot bring ourselves even to consider this" (Green, p. 94). The Jews had two objections to the crucifixion:
 - a. It indicated weakness in the Messiah.

- b. It was specifically asserted that any whose body was exposed upon a tree was cursed by God (Deut 21:22+).

The second objection is refuted, e.g., in 1 Pet 2:24 and Gal 3:10, 13, where Peter and Paul argue that Jesus bore *our* curse for our sins when he was crucified.

The first objection may be dealt with in Mark by the many parallels between Jesus' death and OT prophecy, esp. Pss 22 and 69, laments of a righteous sufferer:

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| a. Ps 22:1/Mk 15:34 | Jesus' cry of dereliction |
| b. Ps 22:18/Mk 15:24 | division of Jesus' garments and casting of lots |
| c. Ps 22:7-8/Mk 15:29-32 | wagging heads & mockery |
| d. Ps 69:21/Mk 15:36 | offer of vinegar and wine mixed with myrrh |
| e. Ps 69:4/ Mk 15:14 | they hated him without cause and attacked him with lies |
| f. Ps 22:22-31 | abandoned, but vindicated in the end |
| g. Ps 22:12,16/Mk 15:16 | surrounded by powerful men ("bulls of Bashan"), Gentiles ("dogs") |
| h. Amos 8:9/Mk 15:33 | darkness at noon |
| i. Ps 22:14-17/Mk 15:24 | elements of crucifixion: dehydration, dislocation, heart failure, physical exhaustion, pierced hands and feet and nakedness ¹ |

It should be noted that not only are Pss 22 and 69 traditionally taken as Psalms of David, but their descriptions are difficult to apply to David, who lived centuries before crucifixion was invented, never fell completely into his enemies' hands (Ps 22:12, 16), died peacefully in bed rather than by execution (22:15) and was born in a state of iniquity (cf. Ps 22:9-10 and Ps 51:5). This lends considerable support to the interpretation of these passages as prophetic.

Paul and later writers also refuted this objection by proposing the death on the cross as the supreme act of power (Col 2:11-15, 1 Cor 1:22-25, Phil 2:8-11). The early church further held that the resurrection demonstrated the victory of the cross (Acts 2:23+, 31+).

Read Col 2:11-15 and 1 Cor 1:22-25. How, for Paul, is the cross a sign of victory rather than weakness?

2. Jesus has taught earlier in Mark that being his disciple means sharing in his suffering: "Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'" (Mk 8:34). Jesus' service to us was unique in that he paid, once for all, the ransom for our sins (Mk 10:45). In the words of Williamson, "Jesus exercises power through weakness and authority through love, thereby revealing in revolutionary terms the way the ultimate Power of the universe works." Practically speaking, how have you seen servant leadership modeled meaningfully?
3. Read the accompanying excerpt from the op-ed *Where Faith Thrives*. Given that Jesus called his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him, do you think American

¹ For a medical description of crucifixion, see William D. Edwards, *JAMA*, **255**, pp. 1455-63 (Mar 21, 1986).

evangelical belief truly is in danger because our American predecessors were too successful at creating a context where faith has fewer obstacles than in non-Western countries?

4. Mark underscores Jesus' kingship in this chapter: Jesus is tried and mocked as king of the Jews (vv. 2, 9, 12, 18), and crucified as king (26); He is mocked as Messiah, king of Israel (32), and dying cries out as using the words of David (34). Even the centurion calls him the Son of God (39), a Hebrew royal title. Lamar Williamson writes,

The centrality of the term "King of the Jews" in this passage poses a special interpretive challenge. In a culture in which kings are only historical memories or decorative figure-heads, the affirmation that Jesus is King of the Jews runs a double risk of being meaningless. The interpreter must somehow recover not only the notion of Messiah, but that of kingship itself.

Discuss.

5. Jesus was crucified at Golgotha, outside the city walls of Jerusalem.² The author of Hebrews draws on this in Heb 13:11-14:

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

What is meant by this passage?

6. Peter, in 1 Pet 2:21-23, encourages early Christians, suffering for their faith, saying,

But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

How *would* this have encouraged the early believers? Is this encouraging to you in times of trouble?

Bibliography:

Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark: Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press: Louisville) 1983.

The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, eds. Ray Brown et al. (Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, NJ) 1990.

Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids) 1970, p. 94.

² *Golgotha* is a Greek transliteration of Aramaic *gulgulta*, meaning "skull". The name *Calvary* comes from the Latin word for skull, *calvaria*.

Excerpt from the op-ed *Where Faith Thrives* (New York Times, Mar 26, 2005) by Nicholas Kristof:

Dete Crossing, Zimbabwe—So with Easter approaching, here I am in the heart of Christendom. That's right, Africa. One of the most important trends reshaping the world is the decline of Christianity in Europe and its rise in Africa and other parts of the developing world, including Asia and Latin America...

On Easter, more Anglicans will attend church in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda—each—than Anglicans and Episcopalians together will attend services in Britain, Canada, and the U.S. combined.

More Roman Catholics will celebrate Easter Mass in the Philippines than in any European country. The largest church in the world is in South Korea. And more Christians will probably attend Easter services in China than in all of Europe together.

In short, for the first time since it began two millennia ago, Christianity is no longer “Western” in any very meaningful sense.

“If on a Sunday you want to attend a lively, jammed full, fervent and life-changing service of Christian worship, you want to be in Nairobi, not in Stockholm,” notes Mark Noll, a professor at Wheaton College. He adds, “But if you want to walk home safely at night, you want to be in Stockholm, not Nairobi.”

This shift could be just beginning. David Lyle of Baylor University sees some parallels between China today and the early Roman empire. He wonders aloud whether a Chinese Constantine will come along and convert to Christianity...

Whether in China or Africa, the commitment of new converts is extraordinary. While I was interviewing villagers along the Zambezi River last Sunday, I met a young man who was setting out for his Pentecostal church at 8:30 a.m. “The service begins at 2 p.m.,” he explained—but the journey is a five-hour hike each way.

So where faith is easy, it is fading; where it's a challenge, it thrives.

“When people are in difficulties, they want to cling to something,” said the Rev. Johnson Makoti, a Pentecostal minister in Zimbabwe who drives a car plastered with Jesus bumper stickers. “The only solution people here can believe in is Jesus Christ.”