

THE PASSION OF JESUS

**A STUDY IN
THE GOSPEL OF MARK
CHAPTERS 14-16**

BY STEVE HART

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	03
READING, STUDYING, AND BEING GRIPPED BY THE GOSPEL	11
7 STUDIES IN THE PASSION OF JESUS	13
MARK 14.53-65: I AM	15
MARK 14.29-72: I WILL NOT DENY YOU	21
MARK 15.1-15: CRUCIFY HIM!	29
MARK 15.16-32: MOCKED AND REVILED	35
MARK 15.33-39: BREATHED HIS LAST	41
MARK 15.33-47: A RANSOM FOR MANY	45
MARK 16.1-8, 9-20: HE IS NOT HERE!	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY	57

INTRODUCTION: THE PASSION OF JESUS

Mark begins his account of the life of Jesus with these words:

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

The word “gospel” literally means “good news,” and the Christians borrowed the phrase out of its Roman Context. When a Roman Emperor went to war, the common people waited eagerly to hear word from the front-lines. If the battle went poorly, the Emperor sent back Generals to warn the people to prepare for battle. The Generals came to tell the people to prepare to fight for their lives if they had any hope of freedom.

On the other hand, if the battle went well, the Emperor sent back heralds with a message of “good news.” These heralds were called “evangelists,” the proclaimers of “gospel.”

According to the great preacher Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones, every religion sends Generals. Religion tells us that if we want happiness, salvation, enlightenment, oneness, nirvana, or freedom, we’ll need to fight for our lives. We’ll need to work hard, be devoted, practice discipline, and give undivided attention to the tasks of spiritual growth and enlightenment. And if we make the grade, win the battle, and do our best, there is a chance of victory. You’ll have to fight for your life.

Christianity, on the other hand, sends messengers. These “good news-ers” bring a message of victory already accomplished, of freedom already earned. The Christian gospel tells us that the bat-

tle has been won for us, that we are already free, that the Emperor has secured our joy at the cost of his own life!

The gospel of Jesus Christ is just such news. It is foremost an announcement and a proclamation of something that has already happened; it is not primarily information about what we are to do. Certainly there is much to for us to do, but the central focus of the gospel is that whatever *we* do comes as response of gratitude to what *He* has done.

The gospel announces what Jesus has done for us, completely apart from us. And it proclaims that what he has done, he has done to the utmost. But what, exactly, has he done? That is the question Mark answers in his account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Jesus the King

In the first 8 chapters, Mark shows Jesus the King. For the first 8 chapters, Jesus is on the move, doing everything we might imagine the King who brings God's Kingdom to do. He is healing the lame and giving sight to the blind and opening the ears of the deaf. He feeds the hungry and he calms the storms. He embraces the social outcast, the community-forsaken, and the religiously rejected. He offers forgiveness to the guilt-ridden, freedom to the demon-bound, and hope to those who have almost given up. Jesus is a King!

Jesus creates quite a stir in the first 8 chapters of Mark. By the end of chapter 8, the crowds are in a frenzy trying to figure him out. Who is this man? Where does he get such authority?

In fact, at the end of chapter 8, Jesus asks his disciples about the opinion of the masses: "Who do people say that I am?" In the his-

tory of religion, no other teacher or spiritual guide has made himself the central piece of the puzzle. Buddha was a guide. Muhammad was a prophet. Moses was teacher. They all pointed to the way, pointed to God, pointed away from themselves. But Jesus points to himself: “Who do the people say that I am?”

The disciples respond to Jesus’ question honestly: the masses are uncertain. Some say he is John the Baptist, raised from the dead. Others think Elijah has returned. More than a few are certain Jesus is a prophet. They are close, but not quite there.

So Jesus repeats the question, this time to his disciples: “Who do *you* say that I am?”

Peter, the ring-leader, speaks up: You are the Christ, that much we know! And of course, Peter is right. Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the long-awaited King come to set the world to rights. That is who Jesus is; Mark has told us so from the beginning.

But Jesus is not the kind of King Peter is thinking of.

Peter, like most good Jews in the first Century, was waiting for a political and military leader who would overthrow the oppression of Rome and establish God’s people once again. The Jews were waiting for a King with a sword who would vanquish God’s enemies by war and bloodshed.

Jesus, on the other hand, insists that he has come as a suffering servant, a King on a cross, and that the only blood that will be shed will be his own.

Jesus the Servant

In chapters 9-13, Jesus marches toward Jerusalem, teaching his disciples exactly what kind of King he is. He is going to Jerusalem to suffer, not to conquer. Rather than be welcomed and applauded by the religious leaders, he'll be rejected and condemned. Rather than overthrow the Roman government, he'll be abused, mocked, flogged, and crucified as a criminal.

When he finally arrives in Jerusalem in Chapter 11, he rides into the city not on a conquering war horse, but on a donkey colt. He doesn't come with a cohort of guerrilla warriors, but with a simple band of singing peasants. Jesus has come as a King, but he is a Suffering Servant King. He has not come to overthrow wickedness and evil, but to be overthrown by it.

In Chapters 9-13, Mark patiently teaches us that what is about to take place against Jesus in Jerusalem is no accident. It is not an unfortunate turn of events for a man who showed great promise. Jesus is fully aware of the fact that he comes to serve and give up his life, exactly as he predicted would happen.

Jesus The Son of God

In the final 3 chapters of Marks Gospel, Jesus is betrayed, condemned, beaten, crucified, and buried in a stone tomb. A good, strong, patient, kind, and just man is treated worse than a hardened criminal. He is betrayed by Judas, one of the 12 disciples, and the other 11 all desert him. The religious leaders falsely accuse him, mock him, and beat him. The Roman governor, Pilate, knows he is innocent, but hands him over to be flogged and crucified anyway. The crowds mock and jeer. Criminals being crucified that day heap scorn him. And then the Roman soldiers nail him to a cross.

The Romans had perfected execution. The cross was - and still is - the most shameful, appalling, and grotesque way to die. The Romans crucified the worst of criminals, publicly humiliating them, and clearly warning anyone who would dare defy them.

The cross consisted of two beams, the upright beam implanted in the ground and the other beam carried by the criminal. Victims were not crucified way up in the air on top of a hill as is often portrayed; rather, the cross was approximately 7 feet high, and was erected along busy roads or near marketplaces.

Jesus would have been nailed to the cross-beam through his wrists, which would have severed the median nerve, sending shock-waves of pain through his arms and immediately causing his hands to contract into tight fists. His feet would have been turned sideways and nailed through the heels, with a small board placed on the end of the nail to prevent his feet from slipping off.

Under his buttocks, a small seat would be nailed, which, rather than offer some relief, actually served to prolonged suffering by allowing him to continue to breath. And often a criminal's genitals were nailed to the seat to keep him from lifting up off it. Everything was done in order to create the worst pain for the longest amount of time.

So there Jesus hung, in full public view, with many around to scoff, mock, and spit at him. Utterly rejected and alone, Jesus screams, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In that moment, two incredible events take place. First, Mark reports that the curtain of the Temple is torn in two. The curtain separated the worshippers in the Temple from the presence of God.

The curtain signified the distance between God and man. Only once a year, on the day of Atonement, was anyone allowed to go past that curtain. On that special day, the High Priest would go in to the presence of God with the blood of the sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people. Mark tells us that at the death of Jesus, the curtain separating God from humanity was torn in two. Jesus' death opens the way to fellowship and friendship with God.

And then, a soldier, one of Jesus' executioners, becomes the first person in Mark's story to rightly understand the identity of Jesus: "Truly this man was the Son of God." His confession completes Mark's earlier description of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God:

"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Mark began his story by telling us that Jesus is the King and the Son of God. We've seen that he is in fact a King, and we've seen what kind of King he is, but only when he is hanging on the cross do we finally see that he is also the Son of God.

The Passion of Jesus

We call this brutal end to Jesus' life his "passion," from the Latin word *passus*, which means "suffering." In his passion, Jesus does for us something we could never do ourselves.

As a King, he gives up his royal status, identifies with the least and the lost, the outcast and the downcast, becomes a curse for them, and goes to battle against death, Satan, and hell, emerging victorious three days later.

As a Suffering Servant, he voluntarily takes upon himself the evil and pain of the world, and suffers the just punishment due, fully

absorbing the wrath of a holy God against sin, thus ensuring our forgiveness and restoring us to friendship with God.

As the Son of God, he gives up his status as the Beloved Son, is rejected by His Father, tastes eternal damnation, and becomes the way in which enemies of God become beloved children.

The cross is the center of Christianity because the cross is the Gospel, the “good news.” The cross declares for us what Jesus has done: restored us to fellowship and friendship with an almighty God, enabled us to be called His “dearly beloved children,” and given us new life in him. Christianity is Gospel because it is about the finished work of Jesus on our behalf.

Over the coming weeks, we’ll be further exploring how the shameful and brutal death of God’s own Son is good news to sinners. We’ll look again and again at our need for such a Savior and the way in which his death and resurrection saves us.

And hopefully, by the time we reach Easter Sunday, we’ll have a renewed, deepened, and joyful gratitude for the cross of Jesus.

In the old rugged cross,
Stained with blood so divine,
A wondrous beauty I see;
For twas on that old cross
Jesus suffered and died,
To pardon and sanctify me.

(The Old Rugged Cross, George Bennard)

READING, STUDYING, AND BEING GRIPPED BY THE GOSPEL

As you read the Gospel of Mark, it is important to remember that there is simply no way that everything Jesus every did and said could be written down. So Mark has the job of choosing which stories, events, and sayings had to be included in his retelling of the story. The stories that he chose were important ones, not only to Jesus' first disciples, but also to the early church. These are the stories Peter himself recounted to the early church, many of whom did not know Jesus in his earthly life. And Mark has taken these stories and carefully and accurately woven them together in order to draw us into the experience of Peter and the other disciples.

It is not enough for Mark to tell us the story; rather, he tells it in such a way that we perceive both the experience and the meaning of the event. And he does it with almost zero commentary! Through the events & sayings he chooses, the order in which he recounts them, and the careful attention to all the details involved, Mark weaves a powerful and concise re-telling of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

So what does that mean for how we read Mark?

First, as you read, pay careful attention to the details: word choice, phrasing, order of events, etc. These are intentional! Mark leaves clues to understanding the sayings and events of Jesus' life in the details. No word is accidental! No phrase is turned without purpose! Mark is writing this for the early church in Rome in a time of great persecution of Christians. So he writes carefully, not wanting to stir up unnecessary conflict with the authorities, and yet including references and clues to his meaning clearly enough that this

suffering church would have been encouraged and strengthened to be reminded of what God has done in Jesus. So look for the details!

Second, Mark wants you to tune in to what he is saying because, ultimately, he wants you to *know* Jesus. So pay attention to what he is telling you about Jesus in each story. Ask what each passage reveals about the character, identity, and purpose of Jesus. If you had been there during the event, or listening to the things Jesus was saying, what would have been your conclusion about who he is?

Finally, ask the question of discipleship: what does this mean for me as I believe in and follow Jesus in my everyday life? If Mark is telling you something about Jesus, then he is telling you something about yourself as a Christian. A Christian is nothing more - or less - than one who conforms his or her life to the life of Jesus. The main thrust of the second half of Mark is the fact that Jesus is giving his life for us, and that, therefore, we ought to lay down our lives for others. Mark has written a handbook for how to be a disciple of Jesus!

7 STUDIES IN THE PASSION OF JESUS:

MARK 14.53-65: I AM

(FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, FEB. 10)

MARK 14.29-31, 66-72: I WILL NOT DENY YOU

(SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, FEB. 17)

MARK 15.1-15: CRUCIFY HIM!

(THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, FEB. 24)

MARK 15.16-32: MOCKED AND REVILED

(FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MAR. 2)

MARK 15.33-39: BREATHED HIS LAST

(FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MAR. 9)

MARK 15.33-47: A RANSOM FOR MANY

(PALM SUNDAY, MAR. 17)

MARK 16.1-8, 9-20: HE IS NOT HERE!

(EASTER SUNDAY, MAR. 23)

MARK 14.53-65: I AM

(FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, FEB. 10)

Jesus is arrested by “a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders” (Mark 14.43). This violent mob then takes Jesus to the High Priest, the official leader of the Jewish ruling body known as the Sanhedrin, where Jesus is put on trial.

Begin by reading Mark 14.53-65. Did you notice how many times the word “witness” or “testimony” is used? The main theme of our passage is the true witness of Jesus over against the false witness of the religious leaders.

This trial is in so many ways a mockery of justice. The religious leaders are “seeking testimony against Jesus,” but could find none. A few “false witnesses” come forward, but even then they cannot agree on the charges. And all the while Jesus remains silent.

Why do you think Jesus stays silent during all the testimony? Why does he not speak up and defend himself?

Jesus refuses to get into an argument with the religious leaders, even though his character is at stake. Their inability to even agree on the false testimony speaks for itself, and Jesus has no need to debate about words they can't even get right.

Consider the following quote from Isaiah 53.7:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
and yet he opened not his mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.”

How does the above quote help clarify why Jesus doesn't speak up?

When Jesus made the statement about the Temple, he was actually referring to his coming death and resurrection. He was telling the religious leaders that the Temple would no longer be the center of God's redemptive purposes - it will be destroyed - and that Jesus has now become the Temple, the place where sin is forgiven and reconciliation with God is secured. In his resurrected body all the world will come to worship God. But Jesus is not going to try to convince these men of who he is. There is ample evidence about the true identity of Jesus if they really wanted to know, and by his silence Jesus allows them to do what they have already intended to do: silence him through murder.

Jesus' silence is, in a sense, a judgement against the religious leaders. These are men who are supposed to be the moral and spiritual guides to the masses, and yet they have completely done away with justice in their pursuit of the death penalty for Jesus. By not answering them, Jesus gives them the opportunity to do what is right - investigate the claims, seek justice, and do what is fair.

Why do you think the religious leaders are so intent on putting Jesus to death? Why is a peaceful man such a threat to them? Reread Mark 12.1-12 for more insight.

Jesus is always a threat to anyone who is religiously-minded. Religious leaders, like these in our story, justify themselves by excluding others. Because these men maintained the highest levels of outward morality, they felt they were important and significant. The mere presence of Jesus - his goodness, strength, and love - reveals their hypocrisy. These men have all the outward signs of morality and religion, but their hearts are set on doing what is the ultimate act of evil: killing the Son of God.

Think about your own life. Do you feel superior to others because you are more disciplined, religious, or outwardly moral?

What might it be like to be in the presence of the Son of God, a man like us but utterly unlike us, one who is good all the way through, in whom there is no hint of hypocrisy, untruthfulness, or deceit? Would you feel, like the religious leaders, more than a little revealed?

In Mark 15.10 says, “it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.” Mark is telling us that even Pilate knew the religious leaders had wicked motivations for killing Jesus. Why would the religious leaders be envious of Jesus?

Finally, Jesus does open his mouth to speak. Look at what he says in Mark 14.61-62. This is an incredible claim, and the High Priest tears his garment because he recognizes that Jesus is making an incredible claim. Jesus is not just a good teacher, nor is he another religious figurehead. Jesus is the Son of the Almighty God, and he is claiming that one day he will return as the rightful Judge of the Universe. No other religious leader has ever made such a claim, not in Judaism or elsewhere. Every religious leader claims to be a prophet or a spokesman or a teacher. Jesus claims to be God, and

this is why the High Priest rips his garment. Jesus has uttered “blasphemy,” the claim to make oneself equal to God.

The irony, of course, is that Jesus is the only one for whom such a claim is *not* blasphemy! And if it is true, then it means the end of religion. If religion is about how we get to God, how we make ourselves acceptable to him, and how we can get him to bless us, then God coming to us in Jesus means that somehow all our religious activity has failed.

Do you think the religious leaders understood this about Jesus? Do you think that their envy of him had something to do with the fact that Jesus’ claim to be Son of God meant that their time was up and they were revealed to be frauds?

Jesus being the end of religion is actually be good news to us! It means that we can rest, that we can stop being so concerned about who is in and who is out, and that we can stop carrying the heavy burden to be the judge of the world. Jesus is the true Judge, and both his silence and his confession speak loudly enough. He has come to put an end to the human endeavor of religion and to become the way through which God gets to us!

The reason we don’t experience the freedom of Jesus more often is that we generally don’t believe he really is the end of religion. We naturally fall into patterns of thinking that reflect a religious mindset: “God would be more pleased with me if...” The Gospel tells you that God is pleased with you because of Jesus - his life, his death,

his resurrection - in your place. The reason we confess sin and repent and attempt to be obedient is not to earn God's favor, but to actually live like those who already have God's favor!

Reflect on how God coming to rescue you brings freedom from religion and rules and the need to measure your faith by how much you do.

What might be different in your life if you built your identity on Jesus' work on your behalf, rather than on your own religious work? What if the Gospel was true: God loves you like he loves Jesus because He relates to you like he relates to his Son? How might that change your life if you were to take that truth into the deepest center of who you are?

MARK 14.29-31, 66-72: I WILL NOT DENY YOU

(SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, FEB. 17)

This week we are going to back-track slightly so that we can trace Peter's systematic denial of Jesus. Back in chapter 1, Jesus' first follower was a fisherman named Simon. In chapter 3, Jesus spends a night in prayer before choosing his 12 disciples, and once again Simon is the first one chosen. It is at this moment that Jesus re-names Simon "Peter," and he is called by that name throughout the rest of Gospel, except in one key place.

Peter means "the rock." Peter is the ring-leader for the disciples, the spokesman for their thoughts and misunderstandings, the eager yet often misguided captain amongst the 12 disciples.

Read Peter's personal commitment to follow Jesus in Mark 14.26-31. What do you think - is Peter genuine or arrogant or both?

What does Jesus say to Peter about his verbal commitment? Why do you think Peter thinks he will be an exception to Jesus' statement that all will fall away?

Do you think this is just a normal part of human nature to think that we aren't as bad as everyone else, or that we aren't capable of doing terrible things like other people?

Read about the way Peter, James, and John fail Jesus in the garden in Mark 14.33-42. What is your reaction to them?

It is often easy to separate ourselves from their failure, as if we would have done better if we had been there. But Mark reminds us that this failure happened to the best disciples, the ones who made the loudest claims to be faithful to the end. On three different occasions Jesus returns to check on his disciples, encouraging them to prayer and watchfulness despite their heavy eyes. Jesus doesn't return because he needs them, but because they need him. He returns to check on them, to make sure they are okay, and to encourage them to be faithful in this trying hour.

Spend some time thinking of the times in which you have made great promises and commitment to Jesus. Do you think it is wrong to do that? What does Jesus expect from his disciples?

How does Jesus' response to them in Mark 14.38 resonate with you? Do you think Jesus is condemning them? Or is he telling them that he understands their weakness? Mark 14.37 is the only place Jesus calls Peter "Simon" again.

It seems that all along Jesus has been aware of this tension in Peter, and he is aware of it in his disciples still to this day. His diagnosis of our condition - "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" - perfectly describes our human condition. We all live with great aspirations, the majority of which we are powerless to carry through on!

To his credit, Peter is the only disciple who follows Jesus back into Jerusalem, watching from a distance how it all goes down. Though

he fails in the end, it is significant that he has made it this far when no one else has.

Re-read his 3-fold denial of Jesus in Mark 14.66-72. Why do you think Peter denies knowing Jesus?

Peter's third denial of Jesus in v.71 is actually worse than our English translations make it out to be. Literally, in the Greek, it says "he began to curse and to swear..." In other words, it isn't that he is "invoking a curse on himself," but that he is, in fact, cursing *Jesus* as proof positive that he doesn't know him or care about him. Peter doesn't just deny Jesus; Peter curses him.

Reflect on that for a moment. Why do you think Mark has included this event which is so damaging to Peter's reputation, especially since at the time it was written, Peter was one of the leaders in the church?

Many of the commentaries point out that the only person who would have allowed such a story to be included in Mark's story is Peter himself. Certainly Mark would not have wanted to tell a story that showed the leader of the church to be such a failure! But Peter insisted that his story be shared because it highlights the grace of Jesus to even the worst of disciples! As James Edwards said, "The church can be honest about sin because it is so convinced of grace."

Are there things in your past (or even present) that you think are beyond the forgiving and healing work of Jesus? Spend some time reflecting on those things.

Peter healed Jesus of his past. At the end of the Gospel According to John, Jesus asks Peter, "Peter, do you love me?" Three times Jesus asks the question, painfully taking Peter back into his failure; but this time Peter makes no great promises of faithfulness, no claim to be committed, and no promises of heroics. This time, Peter just says, "Yes." In response, Jesus essentially tells Peter, "Lead my church!" In other words, Peter has repented: he has seen his failure, been broken by it, and received the forgiveness of Jesus, and that experience has uniquely qualified him to lead the church!

What failures do you need to turn over to Jesus to be healed?

Do you think Jesus is disappointed with you, or do you believe the Good News that he has really forgiven it and will use your failure to be for your good and his glory?

Think for a moment about Peter's later life as the leader of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 2). After the resurrection of Jesus, after Jesus returns to heaven, and after Jesus sends the Holy Spirit, Peter becomes the Rock Jesus wanted him to be. How do you think this memory of failure effected Peter's later ministry? Why?

Peter, like his fellow disciples even today, is called to simple faithfulness in the daily opportunities of life. Peter was called to simply say, "Yes, I know him." No more, no less was required of Peter, and the same is true for us today. Being a witness for Jesus requires a deep awareness of your own sinfulness and failure, which creates a true humility and gratitude that Jesus would save someone like you. And as you believe more deeply in what he has gone through to rescue you, it produces a boldness and joy in sharing that message with others.

MARK 15.1-15: CRUCIFY HIM!

(THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, FEB. 24)

Immediately on the heels of the mock religious trial, the Council leads Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate is not normally in Jerusalem; however, because it is Passover, over a million and a half Jews have descended on the city, thus requiring his power and presence to maintain order.

By taking Jesus to Pilate, the religious leaders are hoping to have him executed. And as the passage unfolds, it is clear that the religious leaders will not be refused their request.

Read the story in Mark 15.1-15. Once again (see last week's study) we see Jesus being ambivalent, neither affirming nor denying his identity. Though Pilate asks a seemingly very straight-forward question, Jesus doesn't really answer.

What do you notice about Pilate? What kind of a leader is he?

Look again at v.5. What is it about Jesus that causes this reaction in Pilate?

Pilate lives in a world of power and prestige. Historians have recorded the ways in which Pilate abused his power in ruling over the people and keeping them from revolting. On more than one occasion Pilate has used excessive force to quiet rebellion. It is no wonder that he is surprised by the quiet strength of Jesus.

Read John 18.28-19.16 to get the fuller version of Jesus' interaction with Pilate. What surprises you about their talk?

The focus of their discussion is power. Pilate is a man of power. Jesus is a man of power, too, but in a very different way. For Pilate, power is about keeping control, respect, and prestige. For Jesus, power is about giving your life up for the good of others. Pilate thinks he has all authority over Jesus, to condemn or free Jesus.

But Jesus knows that Pilate's power is exercised only under the almighty power of God. And the great irony is that Pilate claims his tiny bit of power as his own, while Jesus, the Son of the All Powerful God, gives up his infinite power to serve and die as a ransom for many!

Do you think Pilate is aware of this irony? Why or why not?

Does Mark give us any indication of what Pilate thinks of Jesus?

What reasons does Mark give for Pilate releasing Barabbas and crucifying Jesus?

Like Pilate, we often do very wrong or hurtful things because we are enslaved to the things we think will bring us joy. The Bible calls these things “idols.” An idol is anything we look to in order to find our happiness, identity, significance, or worth. Though many of us say we worship and love God, the reality of our lives speaks differently. If God was truly first in our hearts, then we’d obey him out of love for him. The fact that we don’t obey him reveals that we are still addicted to our idols. We try to find our significance in relationships, so we can’t be honest with our friends in fear that they’ll forsake us. We find our identity in our job or school performance, so we’re willing to cut corners or cheat to get ahead and stay on top. We don’t want anyone infringing on our comfort, so we talk about being busy rather than tell the truth about being lazy. And on and on we go, revealing that God is not first in our hearts.

Take a moment to re-read the response of the people to Pilate’s attempt to free Jesus (Mark 15.9-14). Throughout Mark’s Gospel, the crowd has been amazed by Jesus, flocking to him, following him, listening to him, and wanting to make him king. But now, whipped into a frenzy by the chief priests, they are ready to crucify Jesus!

The simple truth is that they have not known Jesus. They’ve heard much about him, and seen much of what he has done, but they don’t know him. What about you? Are you like this crowd, amazed by Jesus, but not close to him, not personally invested in him?

Mark has recorded the response of the crowd to help us remember that we are all capable of being fair-weather Christians. The call to

be a follower of Jesus is costly, and requires whole-hearted devotion. As Jesus moves more and more to the center of your life, be prepared to sacrifice your idols of comfort, approval, control, and power. If Jesus is to be your King and your Savior, then you must find your identity wholly in him. You must be willing to identify yourself with Jesus completely, even though you won't do it perfectly.

Imagine for a moment what it would have been like to be Barabbas. He is apparently a hardened criminal. He is on death row. He is awaiting his own execution. And then he is placed opposite a man everyone knows is innocent, a good and strong man, a man that even Barabbas knows does not deserve death. And then, in the strangest turn of events, a murderer like Barabbas is released, free to go home, free to do as he pleases, while Jesus is condemned to die. It is a great picture for us of the exchange that God offers us in Jesus. Jesus takes our punishment, and we go absolutely free. Jesus endures death and hell so that we only get heaven. Jesus is rejected and condemned so that we are received and welcomed by the Father.

What do you think you would do if you were Barabbas?

According to our text, you *are* Barabbas! Jesus has gotten what you deserve! Jesus freely chose death so that you could go free! And if you take Jesus to be the center of your life, building your identity entirely on what he has done for you, you really will be free!

MARK 15.16-32: MOCKED AND REVILED

(FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MAR. 2)

We are going to take a few weeks to walk through this bloody section of Scripture. In the beginning of this section, Pilate turns Jesus over to the Roman soldiers to be scourged. “Scourging” was a technical term in Roman executions and consisted of being beaten with a leather whip, imbedded in the end with small pieces of rock or bone. With each lashing the skin on the victim’s back was ripped from the body, revealing the muscle and bone and often the entrails beneath. There was no maximum number of lashings, and the victim was completely at the mercy (or lack there of) of the Roman soldiers. Often the scourging was so intense a prisoner would die before getting to the cross.

Read Mark 15.15-32. Mark tells us what happens to Jesus, but he makes no attempt to explain how intense this whole procedure was. Why do you think he doesn’t make his account more sensational by adding all the bloody detail (as Mel Gibson did in “The Passion!”)?

It is difficult for us today to comprehend the shame, mockery, and pain that Jesus went through on that day. We read the story from a distance, coolly, without emotion or affection. If you have been in church for very long, the whole idea of Jesus dying for our sins has become trite and all but meaningless. It should not be so! Though Mark doesn’t sensationalize with the details, he does invite us to experience afresh the shame and glory of this gruesome event.

The soldiers dress Jesus in a purple robe and a crown of thorns, a mockery of the charge against him: “King of the Jews.” They beat him. They spit on him. They kneel before him in mockery. The whole scene is laced with irony: no one thinks he is a King or the Son of God because he seems so weak, yet Mark wants us to see that his refusal to retaliate or rescue himself is proof positive that he *is* the Son of God!

Mark focuses on the mockery and shame of Jesus on the cross, not just his physical death. Why are they mocking him? What are the claims that Jesus made that the people are mocking?

The magnitude of those claims are difficult for all of us. It is not his teaching nor his healing that lead to such mockery. But the claims to be the end of religion (“destroy the temple” v.29), to be the only way to salvation (v.30-31), to be the King (v.26), are so massive and incredible that people mock him because of them.

The same is true today. People don’t mind the ethical teachings of Jesus, and many non-Christian people find in his teachings great insight and power for living. His works of justice and mercy are also very attractive to people our day, and if you work towards such things, you’ll find a great number of non-Christians who will join you in such endeavors.

But if you want to hold to his radical claims - to be the unique and only Son of God - you will find yourself in a small and mocked company.

Jesus' radical claims force us to make a decision about him. You cannot simply "like" Jesus. If he is the Son of God, then you either worship him or you kill him. There is no in-between. Jesus is a divisive person if you take him as he is. Unfortunately, almost no one wants to take Jesus as he is. We want a designer Jesus who gives some good advice about living and caring for others but who mostly leaves us alone.

What is it about us that reacts so strongly to these claims?

Because Jesus is all or nothing, his claims make claims on our lives. If he is the Son of God, then he has every right to tell us what is right and how to live. And we hate that.

Have you noticed this in your own heart: when something is forbidden, you want to do it all the more? Why is that?

The Bible teaches that our core problem is that we have refused God's leadership in our lives and instead chosen to be self-reliant and self-sufficient. Jesus comes to reconcile us to God, but that requires that we let him take charge.

Reflect on your own life. How have the radical claims of Jesus changed your life? In what ways do you still not give him control?

How is Jesus mocked today? What are the ways that people respond to the radical, all-or-nothing claims of Jesus?

Do you personally feel this mockery aimed at yourself? Does it encourage you to know that it has always been this way for those who would claim Jesus?

In the middle of the mockery, Mark places a one-verse story about a man named Simon of Cyrene. Take a moment to read Mark 15.21. Why do you think Mark included this detail?

Mark almost never includes personal names beyond a few disciples, yet in this one verse he has included 3. The commentaries all point out that apparently Alexander and Rufus, the sons of Simon, are known to Mark's audience in Rome (see Romans 16.13). Their dad carried Jesus' bloody cross-beam - what an incredible heritage!

But Mark is doing more than just pointing out that Simon was there; he is also showing us how we move beyond the hard claims of Jesus to be changed by them. Simon has done the very thing that, according to Jesus, will define a true disciple: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8.34).

Simon is a living example of the way that discipleship works. Jesus is carrying a cross he doesn’t deserve, suffering in a way that he shouldn’t, taking the punishment for us. He does it all; he is mocked, beaten, and crucified in our place. And so, though we also must take up a cross to follow him, we pick up a cross that ends not in death, but in eternal life! Our cross-carrying is not in punishment for sin, but as a gift of grace leading to eternal life.

If we are to have eternal life, he must taste eternal damnation. If we are to receive the crown of life, he must wear a crown of thorns. If we are to wear robes of righteousness, he must wear a purple robe of mockery. By simply reporting the details, Mark has given us the meaning of the cross: *substitution*. Jesus gets what we deserve so that we can get what he deserves. And if, like Simon, you are willing to take up your cross and follow him, you will be transformed!

To “take up your cross” simply means to identify with Jesus in his suffering rather than standing at a distance and mocking him. Reflect on the ways you carry a cross with Jesus.

MARK 15.33-39: BREATHED HIS LAST

(FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MAR. 9)

Read Mark 15.33-39. Jesus is now hanging on the cross, naked, mocked, and crying out. It is a scene of utter despair: the one who claimed to be God's only Son is so utterly rejected and alone that he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It seems like a terrible ending for a story which began with such high hopes.

The irony is that, for Mark, this is the climax of his story. You might expect, if this were a modern movie, for there to be a great last-minute change of events. The hero suddenly comes down from the cross! The enemies are vanquished! Jesus' friends rescue him and he leads them into victory!

Not in this story.

Read the passage, and note how many dark and depressing elements are included.

Turn back to Deuteronomy 21.22-23. What does it say?

Certainly this verse seems to be fulfilled in the death of Jesus. There is darkness covering the whole land - literally, the whole earth. He is given "sour wine" to drink, probably a vinegar wine, symbolic of the bitterness of his death. He is crying out for rescue, and yet no one comes. His heavenly Father, with whom he has shared an intimate and life-giving relationship, is silent. He breathes his last. He is dead. He is a cursed man.

Have you ever had someone close to you die? Reflect for a moment how the death of Jesus would have affected those closest to him.

At that very moment, though, Mark reports on two incredible events. First, the curtain in the Temple is torn in two. This curtain separated the worshippers from the Holy of Holies, the areas of the Temple where God dwelt. No one could enter into that place except the High Priest, and then only once each year on the day of Atonement. This was the day when the High Priest offered a sacrifice before God for the forgiveness of the sins of the people.

Why do you think it is significant that the curtain is torn in two?

If there is no more curtain, what does that do to our access to God?

Mark is telling us that in the death of Jesus, the veil of separation between God and men has been removed. Ever since the fall of humanity in Genesis 3, there has been a flaming sword separating man from fellowship with God. The Temple was a temporary mediator between God and men. But the death of Jesus has become the final sacrifice, earning once and for all forgiveness of sin and unmediated access to God!

The second thing Mark reports is this confession by the centurion: "Truly this man was the Son of God." This is the confession of faith, the truth about Jesus that Mark has been trying to help us see since chapter one!

By connecting these two events, what is Mark teaching us about the death of Jesus?

Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him (see John 14). Without saying it, Mark is saying it. Without need to comment on it, Mark has told us this fundamental truth about Jesus. He is the unique Son of God who has come to “give [his] life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10.45). In his death, Jesus offers himself for our sin. He tastes death, he experiences separation from his Father, and he cries out, “It is finished!” (John 19.30).

The death of Jesus is the climax of the Gospel. “The cross is the intersection where God meets humanity” (Edwards). The cross has long been the symbol of Christianity for just this reason. Though it looks as if everything has gone very wrong, Mark wants us to see that everything going “wrong” for Jesus is really good news for us! He suffers in our place! He dies in our place! He experiences separation from the Father in our place!

And if he has experienced all that, we can be sure we never will! What gloriously good news to know that God is our Father and that he will never leave us or forsake us. We can confess with Paul:

“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8.38)

Because Jesus was separated from the love of God, you and I never will be! The only thing required is faith, the simple heart-level response of awe, gratitude, and worship. Faith is to reach out and take what Jesus has done and make it your own. And faith is the ongoing work of building your life on the reality of God’s love for you in Christ.

To walk by faith means to preach the cross to yourself every day, over and over, until you are so deeply convinced of God’s love toward you and the finality of Christ’s work on your behalf. The passion of Jesus - his suffering - was not meaningless. On the contrary, it is full of good news for sinners in need of grace. And you can count on it!

MARK 15.33-47: A RANSOM FOR MANY

(PALM SUNDAY, MAR. 17)

Mark invites us to envision the crucifixion from a distance. From a distance, we're invited to view who all is at the cross. Mark highlights 3 distinct people who are effected by the death of Jesus.

Re-read the section, Mark 15.33-47. Notice all the names that Mark has included. Who is participating in this scene?

In verse 39, Mark tells us about a Roman centurion, one of Jesus' executioners, who makes the climactic confession about Jesus being the Son of God. Here is a pagan man who has participated in the crucifixions of multitudes of traitors and criminals cut to the heart by the death of a peasant from Galilee.

In verse 40, he tells us there were some "women looking on from a distance," women who had been following Jesus all along. Though we've heard almost nothing about them, Mark points them out at this incredible spot - the death of Jesus. Why bring them out now?

And then he tells us about a certain member of the Council, the group of religious leaders that put Jesus to death, who has been a secret disciple of Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea comes to Pilate - an incredibly bold move - to ask for the body of Jesus. Risking his

own life, Joseph then takes the corpse and puts it in his own upper-class tomb.

Each of these people give us a glimpse of what it means to be a disciple of the crucified Jesus. First, think about this Roman centurion. He is the first and only person in Mark's Gospel to confess the full truth about Jesus. His confession, "Truly this man was the Son of God," is what Mark has been trying to show for 15 chapters!

What causes the centurion to make this confession?

This man has seen hundreds die by crucifixion. Why do you think Jesus' death is so amazing to him?

It is not enough for us to say that Jesus was a good teacher, or even to acknowledge that he might be Israel's Messiah. To understand Jesus rightly, we must join with the centurion in confessing him to be the unique Son of God. This is the confession of saving faith, the confession which takes the work of Jesus to be your own. "I believe he is the Son of God" is the most basic confession of a true disciple.

Can you join the centurion in this confession? Why or why not?

Re-read what Mark says about the women. Do you think it is cowardice that keeps the women from coming to the foot of the cross?

Where are the disciples of Jesus at this time? Do you think that Mark would have told us about them if they were present at all? Does that mean that the women are better disciples than they?

According to Mark, the women “followed [Jesus] and ministered to him.” No one else is given this kind of description of faithfulness. Why do you think Mark has not really mentioned them up to this point?

Though the women are not at the foot of the cross, they are more bold than Jesus’ closest friends. While all the disciples have fled the scene, the women remain at a distance, watching the final moments of Jesus’ life. They are the eye-witnesses of his death, and (according to Mark 15.47) the eye-witnesses of his burial. The women are the only followers of Jesus faithful to the end!

Re-read the account of Joseph taking the body of Jesus in Mark 15.42-47. What surprises you about Joseph?

What personal cost does Joseph risk in order to give Jesus a proper burial?

Why do you think Joseph is willing to risk his respect and his life to bury Jesus in his personal tomb?

MARK 16.1-8, 9-20: HE IS NOT HERE!

(EASTER SUNDAY, MAR. 23)

If Jesus had stayed in the grave, we'd never have a Gospel According to Mark - or Matthew, Luke, or John, for that matter! If Jesus had stayed dead, like most people do, we'd probably never have heard about him. There would be no reason for anyone to report about a good man who claimed to be the Jewish Messiah but was killed. His death would have proved him to be a liar, no matter how great his life had been. Jesus would not be a familiar name to any of us, and the world in which we live would be a very different place.

Read Mark 16.1-20. As you might notice, verses 9-20 are not the original ending to Mark's story. Scholars speculate two different things. Some argue that Mark ended his story in verse 8: though it seems like an awkward ending (silence and fear!), Mark leaves it unfinished with a purpose. Other scholars argue that the last page of Mark's account was somehow lost, though it was probably very similar to Matthew 28.9-10, 16-20 (see, for example, Edwards p.504). What we have in verses 9-20 reflect a mosaic of stories from the other gospels pieced together in order to bring some resolution to Mark's otherwise unfinished account.

That Mark would leave his story "unfinished" is an attractive hypothesis. What if Mark ended his story at v.8, with the women afraid and not telling anyone? What if he purposely didn't bring a resolution to the story? Could it be that he is wanting each and every reader to recognize that we all have the responsibility to tell the story, too? Could Mark be insinuating that since Jesus is alive, since the grave is empty, we each can meet the resurrected Jesus, take him as our own Savior, and become those through whom he will tell the story to the world?

The Gospel of Jesus is indeed an unfinished story. Jesus' work of reconciling us to God, ensuring our forgiveness by suffering in our place, is certainly finished. He has opened the way to the Father,

and there is not need for us to do anything to contribute to that work. It is done.

But it is also true that we must take this finished work and apply it in our own lives. We must not sit at a distance to the cross and empty tomb. We must take it into our own lives, we must take Jesus and his work to be for us!

Let's look at the details of this final scene, v.1-8. Re-read it. Who are the first witnesses to the empty tomb and the reality of Jesus' resurrection?

Does it surprise you at all that the only witnesses to Jesus' resurrection are women? Consider also that a woman's testimony in the first Century meant almost nothing.

If the early Christians were trying to convince their opponents of something that didn't actually happen, they would never have used women as their first witnesses! They would have chosen someone

like Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 14.43) or a Roman soldier, or at least a few of Jesus' disciples. And Mark, if he were not writing about a historical event, surely would not have made this part up. He wouldn't have made women his first witnesses to the empty tomb!

In fact, if Mark made this up (as many people argue today), he wouldn't have told the story like this at all! What other details are in the text that don't make it more believable?

If you were trying to trick people, would you end with women who are so afraid they don't tell anyone? Would you have ended with an empty tomb, but no resurrected Jesus sighting? Would you have ended with the male disciples no where to be seen? Would you have included the fact that the angel was "sitting on the right side?" There are simply too many awkward details for this to be made up!

And besides that, there is no plausible explanation for the rise of Christianity unless the resurrection is true. Why? There is simply no way to account for the way in which Christianity turned the world upside down in the first 3 centuries unless you account for the actual physical resurrection of Jesus. To this day no one has come up with a theory that would account for Christianity's incredible growth which excludes the resurrection. No one would even know the name Jesus unless he actually rose from the dead. His disciples would have returned to being fisherman. They would not have given their lives for a lie. No one - especially not devout

Jews - would have followed a man who was cursed by God and died on a cross. It just simply would not have happened.

Re-read vs. 5-6. What does the “young man” invite the women to behold?

He doesn't invite the women to a “spiritual experience” of a “mystical Jesus”; rather, he invites them to investigate the “place where he lay.” If you look back to Mark 15.47, you'll see that the women knew exactly where Jesus had been laid. What Mark is reporting is an historical event, not a spiritualizing on the death of a good man.

Write down Mark's description of the women's response to this event. Notice how negative it is!

Have you ever doubted the truth of Christianity? Most of us are a mix of faith and doubt - and according to Mark, we're in good company. The eye-witnesses, the women who with their own eyes saw the empty tomb, weren't convinced! In fact, Mark tells us that they "fled from the tomb!" There is no great response of faith, no eager response to tell the world, and no joyful experience of the risen Jesus. They are afraid!

Read 1 Corinthians 15.1-7. This is the earliest written record of the resurrection of Jesus. Mark was actually written after Paul wrote this letter to the church at Corinth. Notice the similarities and differences in the account.

Though Mark doesn't include an encounter with the risen Christ, he certainly assumes it. He leaves us hanging, not because Jesus didn't rise from the dead, but because he did. Mark wants us to know that this is not the kind of story you read and then set aside. It is a story that forces decision. It is a story that has implications for your life and mine. It is a story that is still being told, and you must make a decision.

You cannot remain neutral to this story. Jesus is alive. You must either accept that reality and see that it literally changes everything, or you must reject it. You cannot stay on the fence. Jesus is the Son of God, and the resurrection puts a final proof to the point. Therefore, either Jesus must become Savior and Lord to you, or you must outright reject the entirety of his life, ministry, death,

and resurrection as a fable and a myth. The one thing you cannot do is remain undecided, dancing somewhere in the middle and holding to a nice Jesus with some good ideas about life. Either he is God, or he is not.

So which is it? Have you made a decision about this story yet?

As you make your decision, remember that faith does not mean absolute certainty or the absence of doubt. Faith means trust. It means looking away from yourself to the actions of Jesus on your behalf. Faith saves you because of Jesus, the object of your faith, and not because you have perfect faith. Trust Jesus. And then live into his story, becoming conversant with the rhythms of grace.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allen, Clifton J. Broadman Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew-Mark (Broadman Press, 1969)

Barclay, William The Gospel of Mark (The Westminster Press, 1975)

Edwards, James R. The Gospel According to Mark (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002)

English, Donald The Message of Mark (Intervarsity Press, 1992)

Keller, Timothy J. *Sermon Series: The King's Cross* (Redeemer Audio, www.redeemer.com)

Fleer, David, and Dave Bland Preaching Mark's Unsettling Messiah (Chalice Press, 2006)

Garland, David E. The NIV Application Commentary: Mark (Zondervan, 1996)

McKenna, David L. Mastering the New Testament: Mark (Word, Inc, 1992)

Williamson, Lamar Jr. Interpretation: Mark (John Knox Pres, 1982)