

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK
Mark 15:1—16:20

By
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The morning after Jesus' arrest He appeared once more before the Sanhedrin. The facial "trial" that had been held a few hours before had happened after sunset and was unofficial because of Jewish law. But now they met to confirm the charge of blasphemy, and more importantly, to haul Jesus off to Pilate, the Roman governor. It was not within the Sanhedrin's power to put Him to death, therefore, they wanted to establish a charge of treason based on His claim to be king of the Jews, and convince Pilate that He was a threat to Roman law and order (15:1).

Jesus' trial before Pilate is like His appearance before the Sanhedrin. During both trials He was interrogated, condemned, and mocked. All the action occurred at the Roman governor's official residence, the Praetorium. Mark wanted his readers to see that there was ample blame to go around. Both religious and civil authorities were responsible for Jesus' death. Jesus was rejected first by Jerusalem and then by Rome. Mark adds a third party to the crime, the crowd, which intimidated Pilate into deciding to release Barabbas rather than Jesus.

The interrogation of Jesus by Pilate featured a different question from that which the high priest had asked Him the night before. Jesus had answered "yes" to Caiaphas' earlier question, "*Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?*" (15:2). But Pilate's question was, "*Art thou the king of the Jews?*" The Roman governor wanted to know if Jesus was a revolutionary, a fanatic seeking to overthrow the civil government.

Jesus' answer to Pilate was evasive, "*Thou sayest it.*" It was as if Jesus said, "*You know very well I am no political revolutionary. My kingdom is based on love.*" Jesus knew the charges were false and the trial was a sham. And He knew that Pilate was also aware of the game being played.

At His appearance before Pilate, the chief priests spilled their venom, but Jesus' reply was louder than all their accusations: silence. There was nothing more to be said, and Pilate was amazed of Jesus' detachment—we would call "cool" (15:4-5).

The character of Pontius Pilate is shown in Mark's brief account of this event. The historical record shows that Pilate was the Roman Procurator of Judea during A.D.

26-36. He had deep contempt for the people he ruled. He crushed riots mercilessly and often ordered executions. The chief priests, in handling Jesus over to Pilate, knew they had an excellent chance of succeeding in their efforts to eliminate this Galilean troublemaker. Today, Pilate would be known as a “hanging judge.”

Mark’s account of the trial reveals two different attitudes in Pilate. He was obviously impressed by Jesus, and his offer to release a prisoner was a way out of his predicament. The last thing Pilate wanted was trouble with the thousands of people who had traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover, so, he tried to get off the hook by offering to release Jesus.

In any other circumstances Jesus would have been the better choice for release over Barabbas, a dissatisfied rebel who was sitting on death row (15:7). But when Pilate suggested that Jesus be released, according to the custom of the time, the chief priests incited the crowd to ask for Barabbas, release instead (15:11). He then asked, “*What will ye then that I shall do unto him whom ye call the King of the Jews?*” And with that the mob shouted, “*Crucify him!*” Pilate then surrendered to their demands “*and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified,*” (15:15).

Pilate knew Jesus was innocent, but his weak behavior on this day has caused him to be remembered forever as the prime example of selfish ambition and moral flab. For this small-time civil servant, it was all in a day’s work. The funny thing is that this was Pilate’s only claimed to fame, for his decision has been recorded forever in the Apostle’s Creed: “*...suffered under Pontius Pilate.*”

Mark 15:15 says that Pilate turned Jesus over after he had “scourged him.” That one word describes a tortuous process known and feared by all who lived under Roman justice. The scourge was a leather strap studded with pieces of lead and bone. When a prisoner was whipped with a scourge, his body was subjected to horrible torture.

In addition to the custom of whipping prisoners before they were executed, the Roman soldiers mocked them unmercifully. Jesus was treated like any other condemned man and became the helpless victim of their cruel horseplay. They dressed Him in royal purple, put a crown of thorns on His head, and shouted, “*Hail, King of the Jews.*” Treating someone about to be executed as if he were a king was the sickest of sick jokes.

Evil is always amplified when its perpetrators add their mocking laughter. The mocking of Jesus was cruel punishment and, psychologically, the pain equivalent of another scourging.

Jesus' own prediction and Old Testament prophecy had both come to pass. His persecution was a vivid reminder to Mark's first-century readers of their own suffering for the faith. And from the time Jesus answered Pilate's question until He was nearly dead on the cross, Jesus uttered no recorded words in the Gospel of Mark. Yet the faithful saw in the quiet figure of Jesus the real king.

By their action the chief priests, the mob, Pilate, and the soldiers condemned themselves. Real authority rested with Jesus, for He was more than a noble example or an innocent sufferer. Jesus represented the authority of God Himself.

The crucifixion, toward which Mark's entire Gospel builds, is described in only twenty-one verses (15:21-41). All of Chapter fifteen has been summarized in four affirmations from the Apostle's Creed. Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate (vs. 1-20), was crucified (vs. 21-32), dead (33-41), and buried (42-47). The key event in Christian history on which Christ's resurrection turns is treated by Mark in a graphic but brief manner.

Simon the Cyrenian made a brief appearance in verse 21, establishing a claim to history as the one who carried Jesus' cross. Jesus was so weak by the scourging that He was not strong enough to carry His cross Himself. So, Simon, a passerby, was drafted for the dishonorable task (15:21). There is no reason to suppose that Simon had ever met Jesus before that day. He was probably one of the pilgrims in Jerusalem for Passover. Mark assumed that his readers would identify Simon by his children, Alexander and Rufus, who were well known in the early church. It is possible that Rufus was the same person Paul referred to in Romans 16:13, "***Salute Rufus chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.***" Possibly Simon and his family joined the Christian movement because he was forced, that fateful day, to carry the cross of Jesus.

Mark then went on to say that they brought Jesus to Golgotha, which means "***the place of the skull***" (15:22). One reason it may have been given that gruesome name was that prisoners often took a long time to die, and some of them became prey for vultures and wild dogs after they were removed from their crosses. There were probably several skulls and other parts of human skeletons in the area, a reminder of what happened regularly on Golgotha.

Next, they offered Jesus "***wine mingled with myrrh,***" but He would not drink (15:23). Women present at crucifixions sometimes gave criminals a drink of drugged wine to ease the terrible pain. But Jesus chose to meet His death with His senses intact. His pain was not dulled by an anesthetic.

Our ability to comprehend the cruelty and pain of crucifixion has dulled over the years by reducing the cross to a piece of jewelry or a shiny symbol. As a means of execution, it was beyond comparison for its ability to prolong death while extending human suffering.

Prisoners were fixed to the “T” shaped cross while it was lying on the ground. Their hands were nailed to each end of the cross bar, and their feet were bound together to the upright post. Then the cross was lifted and shoved into a hole in the ground. There they were left to hang until they died. Often a prisoner would go insane before death brought relief.

The death of Jesus occurred at a time in history when crucifixion was the worst possible way to die. While Jesus was hanging on the cross, the soldiers gambled for His clothes (15:24). The soldiers were probably the four who had been with Jesus and Simon to Golgotha. One of the “perks” for doing their duty was to get the criminal’s clothes. Some articles, for example, the robe, were more valuable than others, so they gambled for each bit of clothing.

Mark tells us that two thieves were crucified at the same as Jesus, one on either side of Him. While executing prisoners in groups was common, Mark reminds his readers that this was evidence that the Scripture was being fulfilled: ***“And the scripture was fulfilled, which saith, and he was numbered with the transgressors” (15:27-28)***. The reference here is to the prophecy in Isaiah 53:12.

It is difficult for any modern reader to imagine the scene that was typical during a crucifixion. Passersby ridiculed Jesus, mocked Him, and hurled insults. Mark reports some of the phrases that were hurled at Jesus, ***“Ah, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself and come down from the cross” (15:29-30)***. The chief priests gloated to the scribes, ***“He saved others; himself he cannot save. Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe” (15:31-32)***. Even the other two prisoners being crucified with Jesus ridiculed Him.

Mark understood what the spectators at the crucifixion did not. “It is because Jesus did not come down from the cross that we believe in Him.” No cross, no crown.

The drama of Jesus’ crucifixion is increased by Mark’s noting of the times during the Roman day when certain events occurred. In verse 25 he reports that it was the third hour when they crucified Him. Later, in verse 33, he tells us that from ***“the sixth hour, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.”***

By our understanding of time, then, Jesus' crucifixion began at 9:00 in the morning, and the skies were dark between noon and 3:00 p.m. The darkness underscored the tragic significance of Jesus' death. It was, indeed, a black day in history.

At the ninth hour (3:00 p.m.) Mark reports that Jesus cried out in Aramaic the words that have troubled many Christians for generations, "***My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?***" (15:34). Jesus' cry is a direct quotation of Psalm 22:1 and has come to be known as "***the cry of desolation.***" There is a mystery for us in these dying words of Jesus. But as the sinless Jesus felt the full burden of the sin of the human race, He experienced something He had never known before—separation from God. Now He felt in His own being the results of sin.

Some of the bystanders mistook the cry of "*Eloi, Eloi*" for the name of Elijah and thought Jesus was calling for help. Someone else filled a sponge with vinegar—sour wine—and put it on a stick and offered it to Jesus to drink. It was not a compassionate act, for Mark suggests it was done only to keep Jesus' dehydrated body alive a little while longer so they could "***see whether Elias will come to take him down***" (15:36).

With another great cry, Jesus died. As crucifixions went, it was a quick death. And at the time of Jesus' last breath, the curtain of the temple was "***rent in twain from the top to the bottom***" (15:38). To Mark's earliest readers the tearing of the curtain meant one of two things. It was either a symbol of the destruction of Jewish religion and the temple itself, or it represented the final breakdown of the barriers between the presence of God and humanity.

The curtain in the temple served to shut off the Holy of Holies, where God was present in a special way, out of the congregation's view. Only the priest had ever been allowed to enter this Holy place. Through Jesus' death the Holy of Holies was now open to all people in all time.

Most of the people crowded around the cross that day were seemingly unmoved by Jesus' death. They were cruel to the end. One exception was the centurion, a Roman military officer on duty at the cross. The effect on him was life-changing, and Mark reported his words as if they were a confession of faith, "***Truly this man was the Son of God***" (15:39). But the gentle soldier, like most of Mark's readers, was able to see the truth only after Jesus had died.

Now, the "secret" of the Gospel has come full circle. Mark announced in his first verse (1:1) who Jesus was, recorded Peter's confession in the middle of his Gospel

(8:29) and climaxed the death of Jesus by reporting the words of the Roman centurion.

Mark then tells us that certain women were distant spectators to the crucifixion events, Mary Magdalene; Mary, the mother of James and John; and Salome. No mention is made of the disciples who had declared absolute loyalty to Jesus. James and John were not there, but their mother was. So were **“many other women which came up with him into Jerusalem” (15:41)**. I believe this information is important because it confirms the essential role women played in the beginnings of the Christian movement.

Although Mark is usually very reasonable with words, he spares nothing in giving us a careful description of Jesus’ burial. First, he introduces Joseph of Arimathea as **“an honorable, counsellor,”** a respected member of the council. He then tells us that Joseph **“also waited for the kingdom of God” (15:43)**.

Joseph was not a member of the inner circle of disciples—they had all taken off and were long gone. But we read that **“he went boldly to Pilate”** and asked for the body of Jesus. This called for rare courage on Joseph’s part. He risked his standing to do what he believed to be right.

In verse 44 Mark tells us that Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus was already dead, so, he checked with the centurion on duty. And when it was confirmed by the officer, he gave Joseph permission to take Jesus’ body. This was the equivalent to issuing a death certificate.

Mark now continues his careful description of what happened next. Joseph took Jesus’ body down from the cross and wrapped it in fine linen. The body was then placed in the sepulchre, and a heavy stone was rolled over the opening to prevent desecration by animals or grave robbers. Mark then tells that this entire scene was witnessed by Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses.

There is great significance for us in Mark’s descriptive account. Joseph, a member of the Jewish council, the Roman governor, the soldier on watch at the cross, and the Galilean women all knew that Jesus was dead and buried. But Mark underscored one very important fact: Jesus really died and was really buried. Any claims that He recovered or was resuscitated simply do not square with Mark’s account. Heresies that denied the physical death of Jesus would be rejected by careful readers of Mark’s Gospel. If Jesus were known to be alive after Easter day, it had to be by resurrection from the dead.

The women of the Gospel story were last at the cross and first at the tomb. Three faithful women played a noticeable role in discovering and announcing the resurrection of Jesus. ***“And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had brought spices, that they might come and anoint Him” (16:1).*** For women to play such prominent role was shocking, given their low status in Jewish society. Among Jews, no woman’s testimony was trusted in court, so it is remarkable that Mark, without hesitation, reports that women were the first witnesses to the empty tomb (16:2-4).

The three women did not go to the tomb that morning with any expectations other than to anoint Jesus’ body, a service roughly comparable to embalming. They fully expected to find a dead body in the sealed tomb, and their major concern was how to roll away the stone that sealed the entrance of the sepulchre. But instead, they found an open grave, and the body of Jesus was missing. ***“A young man,”*** Mark reports, was ***“sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment” (16:5).*** His presence frightened them.

Who the “young man” was less important than what he said, ***“Be not affrightened. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: He is risen: He is not here; behold the place where they laid Him” (16:6).*** The words are partly a reproof, and the young man—or angel—is somewhat rebuking the women for failing to believe Jesus’ promise that God would raise Him from the dead. The message reverses the tragedy, which had seemed to end in the abandonment and death of Jesus. Looking among the dead for the crucified Jesus, the women were told, was useless.

Then the women received specific instructions, ***“...go your way, tell His disciples and Peter that He goes before you into Galilee: there you shall see Him, as He said unto you” (16:7).*** This was a reminder of what Jesus had told them in **14:28**, ***“After I am risen, I will go before you into Galilee.”*** Galilee was the place from which the disciples and the women had come. It was their home turf, and now it represented the jumping off place for the great missionary task which awaited Jesus’ followers.

Interpreters of Mark’s Gospel have long speculated over the idea that his account ended with verse 8. The reasons for this are not particularly important to us as we study this lesson. It is obvious at this point that we are not ***“at the end of the story.”*** So, we will continue with the concluding verses as we have them in the King James Version.

Following the happenings in the tomb, the women ran in shock and fear. Matter of fact, Mark says they were so afraid they did not tell anyone what had happened. Their eyes were closed to the wonder of Jesus' resurrection. Next, in verses 9-14, we have the brief report of three post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. First, He appeared to Mary Magdalene. Unlike the other women, she told the disciples, but they refused to believe her (16:9-11).

Jesus' second appearance was to two of the other disciples as they were walking in the country. But again, when these two told the others, they refused to believe. And finally, Jesus appeared to all eleven disciples while they were eating (16:14). And Mark tells us here that Jesus ***“unbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen Him after He was risen.”***

Jesus then goes on in verses 15-18 to give the eleven disciples His final instructions. They are to preach the Good News of the gospel to everyone, and then He mentions certain signs that come with the commission. The language used here is difficult for us to understand in our day. But the message for us is this: Jesus commissioned His disciples and us to take the salvation message, validated by His death and resurrection, to our family, our neighbors, and people everywhere. And He assured them and us that He will give us the power to carry out the sacred task.

We know from other parts of the gospel story that the followers of Jesus were transformed from fearful cowards after the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus into bold and fearless proclaimers of salvation through Christ. After their empowerment at Pentacost, they moved out across the world witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus, and they did it with power. They brought the New Testament and the early church into existence through their proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus—the central affirmation of Christianity.

Mark affirms all of this in the closing two verses of his Gospel as he speaks of Jesus' ascension to heaven (16:19) and then says, ***“They went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following” (16:20).***

Here we find our source of power today—*the Lord working with us*. With this confidence we can say *“Amen”* in agreement with the closing word of the Gospel lesson.