

The Faces of Calvary

The Passion of Christ – Part II

Mark 15:1-37

Introduction – The Crucifixion

Today, we will, in rapid fashion, take a look at the people involved in the last hours of Jesus Christ's life. It is very clear that the ministry and life of Jesus was surrounded by people. The last few verses of the book of Mark are literally filled with the names and faces of people. What better way to view the death of Jesus Christ than to look at the way His death impacted people, the responses of people, and then, of course, to look at Jesus Christ Himself.

Faces – On the Way to the Cross

Turn in your Bible to Mark chapter 15.

The religious leaders

Let us begin by looking at Mark 15:1a.

Early in the morning the chief priests with the elders and scribes and the whole Council, immediately held a consultation; ...

Let me stop at this point long enough to let you in on the fact that, as you probably already know, this is a sham. The Sanhedrin had in their laws that if they were to condemn a man to death, they had to sleep on their decision of death and then, come back and have further discussion with the criminal. Because these people had already decided beforehand that Jesus would die, they simply met in the morning for a consultation; that is, to say, "Where are the ropes? Let's tie Him up and take Him away."

Continue to Mark 15:1b-15:2a,

. . . and binding Jesus, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate.

Pilate questioned Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" . . .

Pilate is scratching his head, asking, "Are *You* the King of the Jews? *You* – the carpenter with rough hands and simple clothing – are the King?!"

Jesus answers in Mark 15:2b,

. . . And He answered him, "It is as you say."

Then, in Mark 15:3-5,

The chief priests began to accuse Him harshly.

Then Pilate questioned Him again, saying, "Do You not answer? See how many charges they bring against You!"

But Jesus made no further answer; so Pilate was amazed.

Literally, Pilate was astounded.

Jesus Christ, at this point, is fulfilling Old Testament prophecy that said,

. . . like a lamb that is led to slaughter . . . He did not open His mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)

Because Jesus is this Lamb, He will stand before these accusers and remain silent. He could have defended Himself. He could have healed someone at this moment. He could have done a miracle and created undeniable proof to this crowd that He was, in fact, the Christ. However, He would not defend Himself.

The Jewish mob

Now, in Mark 15:6, we find Pilate before the Jewish multitude.

Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they requested.

This was the custom because this was the Passover weekend. The Jews would bring their sins, through the high priest, to God. The high priest would sacrifice an animal – a goat, which would represent the sins of Israel, to God.

Also, on this weekend, as a symbol of what they were doing before God, the Jews would release a criminal. This was as if to say, "We, as humans, can also forgive. If God can forgive all of our sins and all of our crimes, we can forgive the crimes of someone else."

So, on this weekend, the Jews would release a criminal.

The released criminal

Look at Mark 15:7.

The man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection.

If we look back into history, we discover some interesting things about this man Barabbas. Let us note his name, however.

Barabbas is a transliteration, not a translation, of the compound Greek word “bar” and “rabbas”. “Rabbas” is the Greek word “rabbi,” meaning, “teacher”; “bar” means “son”. This young man was actually the son of a rabbi.

Evidently, although it is only implied, this rabbi was so well known in that territory and this son of his; this preacher’s kid that had gone bad was so well known that when they referred to him, they would simply say, “the son of the rabbi – you know who he is.”

This man was part of a band known as Sikari. These were the insurrectionists of this day. Sikari is a word that means, “dagger under the cloak”. This was a murderous group of men who would, by gorilla warfare, take on the Roman Empire. They were assassins, moving about in the dark. Sikari was a dreaded word, filled with horror in that day.

Barabbas had been captured some time before Jesus Christ and was in prison awaiting a certain death sentence. This is the son of the rabbi.

The civil leader

Continue to Mark 15:8-10.

The crowd went up and began asking him to do as he had been accustomed to do for them.

Pilate answered them, saying, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”

For he was aware that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy.

Note that Pilate was aware the Jewish leaders had handed Jesus over because of envy.

When the mask is pulled off these scribes and Pharisees, there is nothing more than a preacher’s squabble; nothing more than men who are upset that Jesus Christ has the ministry that He has. In fact, if

we look back at the beginning of Christ’s ministry, when, as you may remember, the crowd came to hear Him teach, they said,

. . . He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1:22)

The scribes were the self-ordained teachers of the people and they held that position jealously. Jesus Christ had come along with inerrant authority, being the Son of God, and He taught in a way that they had never heard. As a result, their synagogues were being emptied and people were following Jesus.

From this moment, the gospel writers tell us, the scribes sought to put Jesus to death. Why? Because He was saying He was the Son of God? No. Because He was insinuating that He was one with the Father? No. These religious leaders were theological shams. They were putting Jesus to death because they were envious. They wanted the people under their iron fist; their domain. They had them in bondage and they wanted it to remain that way.

Note further, in Mark 15:11-12.

But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask him [Pilate] to release Barabbas for them instead.

Answering again, Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?”

Note the crowd’s foolishness, in Mark 15:13.

They shouted back, “Crucify Him!”

It was not but a few days earlier that these people were lining the streets of Jerusalem crying, “Hosanna,” which means “Save us now.” Jesus was the Messiah and they knew it. They were throwing palm branches into the streets and their cloaks for Jesus’ donkey to ride over and were shouting, “Hosanna – save us now!”

Now, however, the people are shouting, “Crucify Him!”

This is a study in itself that reveals the Jewish nation, by following the Jewish leaders, rejected the King; rejected the Messiah. He came to offer them rest; to offer them the Kingdom, and because they followed the leaders, they all, in unanimity as a nation, rejected the King.

Look at Mark 15:14.

But Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has He done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify Him!”

Now they are a lynch mob.

Note Mark 15:15a.

Wishing to satisfy the crowd . . .

Note the cowardice of this civil leader, Pilate. He was “wishing to satisfy the crowd”.

We have been rough on Pilate, and rightly so, as he was not a man of character. However, if we look back in history, we discover that at this time, he was having an argument with Tiberias, who was sort of his employer. Tiberias was hearing accusations that Pilate was inflexible with the Jewish nation. Pilate was ruling them for his own pleasure; for what he wanted.

So, Pilate was in the cauldron of being accused of being inflexible when this opportunity arose. He thought, “If I let Jesus go, which I know is right, I will perhaps, lose my job. They will then know that I am inflexible.”

Because of this historical context, we read in Mark 15:15b,

. . . Pilate released Barabbas for them . . .

The Roman soldiers

In the last part of Mark 15:15, we read,

. . . and after having Jesus scourged, he [Pilate] handed Him over to be crucified.

Having Jesus scourged was illegal, as they did not scourge a criminal who had been condemned to death. Then Pilate delivered Jesus to be crucified.

Continue to Mark 15:16.

The soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is the Praetorium), and they called together the whole Roman cohort.

I never noticed this before studying this passage again this past week. A cohort was a garrison, so this is perhaps as many as two hundred men. These Roman soldiers are not necessarily angry at Jesus because He says He is the King of the Jews; they are angry because they had caught one whom they consider an insurrectionist. They had Barabbas, and now they have this one who says He is the King of the Jews. They will now vent their wrath and anger in retaliation on this Lamb.

Notice what these soldiers do, in Mark 15:17.

They dressed Him up in purple, and after twisting a crown of thorns, they put it on Him;

You have heard this story I am sure, but it, as black as it may be, provides a backdrop for the beauty of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice and agony.

Scourging is often misunderstood, so let me clarify the agony the Jesus went through. The criminal would be stripped completely naked, his hands tied to a pillar, and he would be bent over. There would be a burly soldier on his left and a burly soldier on his right. Each soldier would have a flagellum, which is a short, blunt instrument with long strips. Sewn into the end of these strips would be metal and stone. The soldiers would alternate blows on the back of the criminal.

We know the number of strikes by these Roman soldiers was not prescribed. It was up to the soldiers and they could strike as often as they wanted. Because they were filled with anger at the Jews and the insurrectionists, and also because Satan had built into them a hatred, even though they did not understand it, for this Lamb, they took out their fury on Him.

Scourging was known in that day as the halfway death simply because most people did not survive. This is the reason they did not do it to condemned criminals.

They did scourge Jesus Christ, however. And perhaps because He was sturdy and certainly because it was not time for Him to die, He survived.

Then, we are told they dressed Jesus in purple. This is not a full length gown; this is a rag. Jesus Christ is standing naked before two hundred jeering soldiers and they throw a strip of purple about His shoulders and say, “Here is your kingly robe.”

The verse then tells us that they make a crown of thorns and put it on Jesus’ head.

Mark 15:19 says,

They kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting at Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him.

At this point, I have had enough. It helps me to turn to Revelation 19, where it tells us that Jesus Christ will come robed in glory. He will not be holding a reed then, but a diadem. He will come in magnificence.

Philippians 2:10-11 tells us that then, not in mockery, but in due honor,

. . . every knee will bow . . . and . . . every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...

Look at Mark 15:20.

After they had mocked Him, they took the purple robe off Him and put His own garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him.

Let me explain this. In this day, they did not take the shortest route to Calvary, or to Golgotha – the place of the skull. It was their practice to take a condemned criminal and lead him through the streets of Jerusalem to show as many people as possible that this person would die because of crimes committed against the state. There would be four soldiers – one in front, one in back, and one on either side.

The condemned criminal would carry the crossbeam; that is, the horizontal piece, on his shoulders. This piece would easily weigh over one hundred pounds. We know from the text, and I will share more implications in a moment, that Jesus was unable to carry this.

One of the fascinating things is that the soldier in front would carry a placard, and on it would read the crimes of the criminal. So, as they wove their way through the streets, the people would come out to see, and they would read on the placard the individual's crimes, whereby he was going to be put to death.

What was written on the placard of Jesus Christ in three languages – Hebrew, Greek, and Latin? “This is Jesus, King of the Jews.” This was His crime.

In tragic irony, Jesus would be led through the streets and be jeered by the people and the crime would be true – He was the King of the Jews.

The religious pilgrim

It says, in Mark 15:21,

They pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His cross.

We know that Cyrene is in North Africa. Perhaps this is a black man who was pressed into service.

Notice, in parenthetic form, that the writer of scripture says, “the father of Alexander and Rufus”.

This does not mean anything to us, but what does it imply? This meant everything to the readers in the New Testament church. And if we study a little further, we will discover in Romans 16:13, that Paul says,

Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord . . .

Also, this may perhaps be the Simon mentioned in Acts 13:1 as being part of the early church and even responsible for ordaining Paul and Barnabas for the gospel ministry.

Let me mention a further implication in the fact that Mark writes the names in this verse, although we will not know until we get to heaven. Simon of Cyrene was a pilgrim to Jerusalem, who had come to be part of the sacrificial system; who had come to offer his sacrifice for his sins. Evidently, he was a God-fearer, since he was a pilgrim to Jerusalem. However, when Simon came to offer his sacrifice, he would carry the crossbeam of the Lamb of God – the final sacrifice that takes away the sin of the world. Somewhere along this trek, as this man carrying this beam wove his way through the streets of Jerusalem, Simon would be converted. And he would share this gospel with his sons, who would grow up to be part of the cause of this dying Lamb.

Faces – On the Crest of Mount Calvary

Now turn in your Bible to Luke chapter 23.

The cross – its cruelty

Look at Luke 23:33.

When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left.

Crucifixion was the invention of the Persian Empire. The reason the Persians invented this is because they worshiped their chief god that was the god earth. They never wanted someone condemned to die to touch and dirty earth, so they created a way to inflict death by suspending that person above earth, and thus they created crucifixion.

We have previously discussed all the heinous details of crucifixion. One that is often overlooked is

what was called the saddle. It would be placed in the center of the vertical beam. It was called the saddle because if the criminal had enough strength, he could push himself up with his legs and rest on the saddle and be able to breathe. But, as time went along, as thirst and dehydration and loss of consciousness would occur, the criminal would slip down off the saddle. Then, his lungs would be stretched and his arms exposed high above his head, and he would die of suffocation; unable to breathe. This is the reason that if the criminal had not died after a certain period of time, the soldiers would break the legs of the criminal. The criminal would then be unable to support himself on the saddle and would slip off and die.

The Savior – His compassion

During this time, Luke 23:34 tells us,

But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

Jesus is saying, “aphesis autos,” or literally, “release them.” And this is a continuous tense, which means that Jesus did not just utter this once.

There would come some religious leader who would scoff in Jesus’ face, and He would say, “Father, release him.” The soldiers would jeer, and Jesus would say, “Father, release them.”

I think Jesus was going back to the time of the Old Testament book of Exodus when they had the city of refuge. This was a city where people could flee if they had committed manslaughter; that is, murder by accident, which we know today as manslaughter. They would be saved from relatives wanting to vindicate the loss of their loved one in revenge. If they could make it to the city of refuge and stayed for a certain period of time, they would be safe. After that period of time, they would be free once again, and even the laws would say they could not be put to death.

I think Jesus Christ is thinking back to this and saying, “Father, release them; for they do not know what they are doing.” In other words, “They are not guilty of first degree murder; they are guilty of manslaughter; that is, murder by accident. They do not understand.”

Why? So these people would have the benefit of fleeing to the city of refuge, which is a type of Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ compassion was incredible.

The criminal – his humility

Look at Luke 23:39-41. There are perhaps, two members of the Sikari dying on either side of Jesus Christ.

One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!”

But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?”

“And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”

Now notice what this criminal says, in Luke 23:42.

And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!”

I love this. How simple it can be.

“Remember me” was one Greek word used by many people in this day. It was used to plead their cause with the Divine. They would often write just this one word in Greek on their tombstone. Dotted around the hillside of ancient Greece would be tombstones with the words, “Remember me.”

Perhaps this Sikari member had seen that the God-fearers; the Jewish people who had put this on their tombstones. Now this was his request for salvation. He did not say, “Give me a place in the kingdom,” but in all humility, he said, “Would You remember me; just remember me when You come in Your kingdom?”

Look at Jesus’ response, in Luke 23:43.

And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

Now wait a second! I can understand saving the Samaritan woman because she could go back and tell the whole city and Jesus could really add up His evangelistic converts. I can even understand saving that sneaky little crook Zaccheus who had been pilfering from the Jewish nation all of his life because he could give some money back.

However, this man could do nothing. I think that was the point. Jesus’ last personal convert came in

such a simplistic form. All this person had to do was say, not “I’m going to join the synagogue,” or “I’m going to give to You,” or “I’m going to remunerate those I have stolen from,” or “I’m going to do good works,” or “I’m going to prove my faith by my works,” but “Remember me.”

Jesus said, “That is enough.”

There are at least four or five, and you can probably think of more, doctrines that this thief puts to rest. Let me give two.

- One doctrine is baptismal regeneration.

Jesus did not say, “Hold it! You’ve got to talk one of those Roman soldiers into going and getting a tub full of water and then, make sure you get doused real good.”

No, there was no water here.

There is the false doctrine that says a person cannot be saved; cannot enter heaven unless they enter through the water. Those who hold to this would have to apologize for Jesus because He did not understand the plan of salvation.

- A second doctrine is salvation by faith plus works.

This man could not go anywhere – his feet were strapped to the cross. He could not give anything – his hands were strapped to the cross. He could not join a church. He could not prove anything.

It is simple grace.

The cry – “tetelestai” – salvation’s completion

Now, Mark chapter 15 tells us that after several other events that would take too long to include in this discussion, Jesus utters the beautiful word “tetelestai”. This means, according to John 19:30, “It is finished.” It does not mean, “I am finished,” because He was not, but “It is finished.”

What was finished? God’s plan of redemption was finished; His plan that began inside the garden when Adam and Eve sinned. God took an animal and killed it and then, took the fur and created some garments representing bloodshed and the covering of their sin. This redemptive plan weaves its way through the Old Testament right up to the cross. Jesus Christ says, “Now, once for all, this is finished. No more bloodshed; no more sacrifices – it’s over.”

What is finished? The fact that Jesus Christ came from heaven to planet earth to build a bridge back to

heaven, and He built it in the form of a cross and said, then and there, “It is completed.”

Someone wrote, “The arms of the cross stretched outward, as if to declare to the human race, ‘Whosoever will, may come.’”

Even me; even you may come.