

PASSION WEEK, PART 2: "THE CRUCIFIED KING"
MARK 15:37-39

Personal Introduction

Good afternoon, everyone. If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta.

If you're new to our church or been away for some time, I'm glad that you're here today. If there's any day to gather together as Christians, it's Good Friday as we remember and give thanks for the death of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

If you're not yet a believer, I'm especially glad you're joining us today. And I want to personally invite you back in a couple days for our Easter Sunday Celebration [this Sunday at 3PM here as well].

Now, it's my privilege to preach the Word of God to us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 2 of our sermon series called "Passion Week," with three sermons through the end of Mark's Gospel account.

Last Sunday was Palm Sunday, where we looked at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem as the promised King who had finally come.

This upcoming Easter Sunday, in a couple days, we'll look at Jesus' resurrection.

And today, on this Good Friday, we'll look at Jesus' crucifixion together.

Today's sermon is titled: "The Crucified King."

So let's get right into it.

Sermon Introduction

We live in a world that is filled with discouragement.

We face lost jobs, conflict in relationships, unmet expectations, sickness and death of loved ones, loneliness, and loss.

But we are not alone in feeling those discouragements. When we look at the cross on Good Friday, and we put ourselves in the shoes of Jesus' disciples, it was perhaps the lowest point in their lives.

The cross was the greatest source of *discouragement* for them. They had followed Jesus for three years, they heard him *say* what nobody else would dare say (like "your sins are forgiven"), and they saw him *do* what nobody else could ever imagine doing (like raising the dead). They believed that he was the Christ, the promised Messiah King, who would deliver them from what they *thought* were their greatest problems. And just earlier that week, they shouted together with the crowds in Jerusalem, "Hosanna!" or "Salvation has come!" There was a heightened sense of *all* that Jesus would do.

And then, everything fell to piece in their eyes. Jesus was arrested, they all fled in fear, one denied him three times, and they watched their Messiah King tortured, mocked, and hung naked on a cross.

I can't imagine the depths of discouragement they knew on that Friday. Such loss, such fear, such disappointment, such loneliness—and such an excruciating death that they had to witness their beloved friend suffer. Good Friday was the greatest source of *discouragement* that man could ever know.

And yet, when we take a closer look, especially on this side of the resurrection, we see that the death of Christ also provided the greatest source of *encouragement* man could ever have.

- We see the love of God for sinners.
- We see the forgiveness of sins.
- We see the sovereignty of God.
- We see the life-altering truth that we are not saved or accepted by anything we could ever do, but only by the grace provided to us in Christ.

And so, that's what we'll look at more in today's passage.

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Mark 15:37-39.

A lot has happened in less than a day.

- Jesus made preparations to celebrate Passover with his disciples (14:12-17),
- he instituted the Last Supper (14:18-25),
- he agonized in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:23-42), where he was betrayed and arrested (14:43-52),
- he experienced an unjust trial before the high priest and Jewish religious leaders (14:53-72),
- he was wrongly delivered over to scourging and death by Pontius Pilate (15:1-15),
- he was beaten and mocked by the Roman soldiers (15:16-20),
- and then he was finally crucified, only to be further mocked by everyone around him as he hung naked and dying on the cross (15:21-36).

And that's where we are as we begin today's passage.

Scripture Reading

Let's read Mark 15:37-39.

³⁷ And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹ And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

This is God's Word.

Overview

We'll look at this passage in three parts:

- I. How the Christ died (v. 37)
- II. What the curtain meant (v. 38)
- III. What the centurion said (v. 39)

And as we go, we'll highlight a corresponding truth in each point.

I. How the Christ died (v. 37)

Verse 37 says this:

³⁷ And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.

Now, we need to know that this was *not* how most crucified people died.

It may help to understand crucifixion a bit more.

As a person's wrists and ankles were nailed to a wooden cross, he would need to pull with his arms and push with his legs to keep his chest cavity open for breathing, and then he would collapse from exhaustion until the demand for oxygen forced him to do it all over again. This produced an agony that could last for *days*, where the victim would *eventually* die from suffocation, cardiac arrest, or loss of blood. If there was a reason to speed up the process of death, the soldiers would smash the victim's legs—and he would die almost immediately either from shock or the inability to lift himself up to breathe.

So for most crucified people, it was a long, drawn-out process where they gradually grew weaker and weaker, and then they would *quietly* die over the course of *days*.

But here, after around six *hours*, Jesus was strong enough to cry out with a loud voice and *then* he breathed his last. Jesus didn't die like all the other crucified people, but it was at this moment that he *decided* to give up his life (cf. Matt. 27:50; Luke 23:46)—it was a deliberate act of his will.

Earlier, Jesus had said, "I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again" (John 10:17-18).

So Jesus was in charge on his own crucifixion and death—and *later* his resurrection. He had *predicted* it multiple times, and having *finished* all that he set out to accomplish by bearing the punishment for sin on the cross, he consciously *decided* to give up his life (cf. John 19:30).

<pause>

Now, the truth to highlight here is that **Jesus willingly gave his life to save sinners**.

As we look at the cross, it would be a *huge* mistake to think that Jesus was a helpless victim—someone who had no say and no power to do otherwise. If that were the case, there would be nothing good about it. If Jesus was just a helpless victim, then there is no sovereignty or love to be seen because he had no choice in the matter.

Not too long ago, I had a conversation with a friend who is not yet a believer. And he told me that one of the things that makes Christianity seemingly non-sensical to him is how he cannot imagine how a father killing his son could ever be a good thing. He asked me, "Would you ever take a knife to your son's throat and kill him for the sake of others?"

And of course, the answer to that is, "No!"

But that's *not* the full story.

First of all, God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; God is one in essence and three in person. This is what Christians throughout history have referred to as the Trinity—we worship one triune God. God the Father and God the Son are *one* in a way that me and my son are *not* one. God the Father and God the Son have *one* divine will in a way that me and my son do *not*.

The good news is that God gave *himself* in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ—not that he gave someone else. God took a knife to his *own* throat (so to speak) to save his people from their sins.

<pause>

Second, Jesus was not a *child*, but he was a grown *man*. He was not *forced* against his will to go to the cross, but he *willingly* went to the cross. And when he uttered his loud cry and finally breathed his last, he was consciously *deciding* to give his life to save sinners.

Third, God's Word tells us that it was "for the *joy* that was set before him" that Jesus endured the cross (Heb. 12:2). Even though Jesus experienced the unimaginable agony of God's judgment for our sins on that cross, he endured it for the *joy* and *glory* that he would receive as a result of his redeeming work (Phil. 2:5-11).

We have to remember that the good news doesn't end with Jesus *dying*, but it continues with him *resurrecting* and *ascending* to the right hand of the Father to receive all glory and honor and praise.

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Therefore, to speak of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son as simply an extension of my relationship as father to my preteen son is not quite right—and it is to grossly misunderstand who God is and what he has done for sinners at the cross.

The truth that Jesus *willingly* gave his life to bear God's judgment for our sins is not something that should cause people to *reject* Christianity, but it is one of the greatest reasons for its acceptance and our encouragement.

How is this encouraging? It's encouraging because we have a God who was *willing* to endure pain and rejection on the cross, so that we can have forgiveness and acceptance. Nobody else *would* or *could* ever do that for sinners. But *this* is our willing God, and *this* is the only God that you can safely entrust your life to.

<pause>

So first, how the Christ died; and second...

II. What the curtain meant (v. 38)

Verse 38 says this:

³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

In the Jewish temple, there were two rooms: a large outer room and a small inner room called the "Holy of Holies" (or the "Most Holy Place"). The inner room was the symbolic dwelling place of God. Nothing impure could ever enter it. And between the two rooms was a *curtain*, which reflected the *separation* between a holy God and sinful man (Heb. 6:19-20; 9:2-14, 24-28; 10:19-20).

The Holy of Holies was only entered through the curtain *once* a year when the high priest would offer an animal sacrifice as a *substitute* for the sins of the people, showing them that their sins deserved *death* before a holy God. Symbolically, the blood of the sacrifice cleansed the priest and the people, providing a way of forgiveness for sins, and therefore a way of fellowship with God. But the blood of animals could never *really* forgive them of their sins, and so every year the sacrifices had to be repeated (Heb. 10:1-4).

But at Christ's death on the cross, when this curtain between the two rooms "was torn in two," it symbolized the new *access* we have to God *through Christ*. Regular animal sacrifices are no longer needed. *Christ* is now our final sacrifice; *he* is our perfect substitute who has taken our sins—past, present and future—and bore them on the cross. And so, *he* has opened up access to God through his death.

<pause>

Now, the truth to highlight here is that **Jesus' work on the cross is the only way to God.**

We do not approach a holy God on the basis of our *own* works. No amount of sacrifices that we bring could ever be enough—that's why sacrifices were repeated over and over again in the temple.

But the only way to approach a holy God is on the basis of *Jesus'* work on our behalf. *Jesus* is the perfect sacrifice, so that no more sacrifices need to be made.

He *alone* lived the perfect life we could not live and died to take the punishment that we deserved for our sins. And so, when he willingly gave his life in our place, the curtain in the temple was torn in two, and we as sinners can now be accepted by God and welcomed into his holy presence *not* because of anything we have done but completely because of what *Christ* has done for us.

That means that, if you repent of your sins and believe in Jesus as your only Lord and Savior, then you can be *assured* that your sins are forgiven and that you are *accepted* by God.

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Now, for some, that sounds incredibly *arrogant*. "How can you be so sure? How can you be so confident?"

To some, it seems more humble to say that you *don't* know but you simply do your best—and just *hope* that God will forgive and accept you.

But that is only a humble response if God has *said* nothing and *done* nothing—and we're completely in the dark. But that is *not* the case.

All of God's Word points *towards* the work of Christ or points *back* to it. God came in the person of Jesus Christ to *willingly* lay down his life as our substitute sacrifice, so that we can have assurance and acceptance. And to *ignore* all of that is to say to God, "Thanks, but no thanks; I'd rather try paving my own way and just hope for the best." That is *not* humility, but that is the height of *arrogance*.

The most humble response is to say to God: "I humbly acknowledge that I am a sinner, and I could never be good enough to be accepted by you. But I thank you for doing for me what I could never do myself. And so, I trust you at your word and I humbly receive what you have given me in Christ. And I'll now strive to live my whole life to please you—not to earn anything from you as if you owe me but out of overwhelming thanks for all you've already given me in Christ."

There is nothing more *humble* than believing God at his Word and receiving Christ's work on your behalf. And there is nothing more *arrogant* than to ignore all of that and try to find assurance and acceptance in your own works.

If you think you can be accepted by God on the basis of your own works, you will either be led to *pride* in thinking that you're good enough to be accepted by God, or to *despair* in knowing that you're really not good enough to be accepted by God. Of course, *apathy* is another option, but that is just another kind of *pride* in ignoring God altogether, but there will be a rude awakening one day when we will stand before him in judgment, and we come to the condemning realization that we never gave him much thought throughout our lives.

The only way to *not* fall into the ditches of *pride* or *despair* is to *not* trust in your *own* works at all but to simply receive *Jesus'* work on the cross by faith. Only faith in God's Word and Christ's work leads to a kind of *humble confidence* that cannot be gained in any other way.

<pause>

So how is this encouraging?

If your faith is in Christ alone, then you can truly *rest*.

On your *worst* days of sin and failure, you can be encouraged that you are *still* counted righteous through faith in Christ's work on the cross for you.

And on your *best* days of doing good, you can be encouraged that, even if you were to stop doing any of those things tomorrow, you are *still* counted righteous through faith in Christ's work for you.

Your standing before God is *not* something you need to ever fear losing, or something that you need to maintain by your good works, but you can *rest* in the fact that no matter what you do or don't do, God cannot love you any more or any less than he already loves you in Christ.

And when you are freed from the burden of trying to *get* right or *stay* right with God, you can now focus all your efforts into enjoying God, pursuing holiness, and loving others.¹

Rather than working *for* an elusive and unstable rest, you can work *out* of the secure and stable rest that Christ has secured for you.

<pause>

So how the Christ died, what the curtain meant, and third...

¹ Milton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer for Christians* (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2008), 25-26, Kindle.

III. What the centurion said (v. 39)

Verse 39 says this:

³⁹ And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

The centurion was the one who oversaw the entire crucifixion process, ensuring that those who were crucified *actually* died (Mark 15:44-45). And so, he would have seen the deaths of many crucified criminals, yet he recognizes that something is very different about Jesus.

In no other execution had he witnessed *darkness* cover the land in the height of day for three hours. In no other execution had *any* of the crucified people died the way that *Jesus* had died.

And amazingly, this centurion who had been among the soldiers who had mocked, beaten, tormented, and crucified Jesus is now filled with awe—and he declares, no longer in mockery, but in awe and wonder: "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

I'm not sure the centurion understood the full meaning of identifying Jesus as the Son of God (cf. Luke 23:47), but at the very least, by claiming that Jesus was the Son of God, he acknowledged that Jesus did not deserve death, and he had done a great wrong in crucifying him; and he acknowledged that Jesus was no ordinary man.

But for us who believe on the other side of Jesus' resurrection, we know that Jesus is the unique Son of God, meaning that he was the promised *Messiah King* who would come to bring salvation to his people *through* his death (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7; Matt. 16:16; Mark 14:61).

And even more, we know that Jesus is the unique Son of God in a more *profound* sense, meaning that he is *God the Son*, the second person of the Trinity, and deserving of all worship and praise and honor and glory that is only fitting because Jesus *is* God himself (Matt. 11:27; Psalm 110:1; Mark 12:35-37).

<pause>

Now, the truth to highlight here is that **Jesus welcomes even the vilest [or the most wicked] of sinners**.

It's interesting that the very first human witness in Mark's Gospel account to positively affirm Jesus as the Son of God is this Roman centurion.

Remember, he had been the one to oversee the entire execution of Jesus. He had been the leader of the soldiers who had *literally* scourged Jesus, tormented him as personal entertainment, and ultimately nailed him to the cross.

If there was *anyone* who had gone too far in their sins against Jesus, who had done too much evil to be forgiven, surely it was this Roman centurion—Jesus' tormenter and executioner.

And yet, Mark makes sure we know that *even* this Roman centurion was not too sinful, too vile, too wicked to turn to Jesus. Salvation was available even to *him*, if he would repent and believe in Christ as the Son of God and as his personal Lord and Savior.

<pause>

And this is the scandal of the gospel. The good news is that no matter how many good things you have done, no matter how many bad things you have done, *anyone* who repents of their sin and believes in Jesus Christ alone as their Lord and Savior can be forgiven, accepted, and welcomed into God's presence.

Why is that scandalous? Because it means that even the tormentor and executioner of Jesus may be welcomed into salvation. It means that salvation is available to even a murderer, a rapist, an addict, a drunkard, and anyone else that you may consider to be the vilest of sinners.

The scandal of the gospel is stated in a song we often sing: “He welcomes the weakest, the vilest, the poor; Our sins they are many, His mercy is more.”

<pause>

How is it that a seemingly upright person who *doesn't* trust in Christ can go to hell, while even the vilest person who *trusts* in Christ can go to heaven?

Some people wrongly understand this as God condemning people for *not* trusting in Christ, but that's not quite right. God condemns people on the basis of their *sins* against him—and he would be completely right and just in condemning every person to hell because *none* of us is righteous in ourselves and we've all sinned against him. God does *not* condemn anyone on the basis of them *not* trusting in Christ, but he condemns only on the basis of people's *sins*.

Condemnation is on the basis of our *sins*, and salvation is on the basis of trusting in *Christ*.

Still, for many, this is *scandalous*.

But if you think about it, everyone is *exclusive* in some sense. Everyone has *some* criteria for who they think should go to heaven or not. If you say good people go to heaven and bad people do not, then that's a *kind* of exclusivity. And you're also left with questions of: Who is good enough? And what about people who grew up in an abusive home or those who grew up with all kinds of immorality around them—is there no hope for them?

Everyone is exclusive in *some* way, but the gospel is the most *inclusive* kind of exclusivity. Salvation is available to *anyone* who would humble themselves to receive the work of Christ on their behalf by faith. You may be an abuser or murderer like the Roman centurion, you may be a prostitute or an adulterer—Jesus welcomes even the vilest of sinners into his heavenly home, if you would only repent of your sins and believe in him alone as your Lord and Savior.²

<pause>

So how is this encouraging?

This is encouraging because nobody is too far gone that they cannot, at any moment, turn to Jesus in repentance and faith and be welcomed by him into heaven.

We didn't read this in Mark's account, but we know from Luke's account that one of the robbers who was mocking Jesus, even as he was being crucified next to him, had a change of heart in his final hours, and he turned to Jesus in repentance and faith, saying “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And how does Jesus respond? Even to this guilty robber who was reviling Jesus just moments before, to *him* Jesus responds, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:42).

If you're not a believer in Jesus Christ, don't be too proud to reject or ignore what God provides for sinners in Christ, but humbly receive his mercy and grace through faith in him alone.

If you've been praying for family members and other loved ones who don't know Christ yet, don't be discouraged by their current state, but take heart in knowing that, at any moment, they can turn to Christ.

They don't have to clean up their lives before coming to Christ. They don't have to prove themselves before coming to Christ. All they need to do is acknowledge their sinfulness and utter inability to save themselves and turn to Christ in repentance and faith.

² Don Carson & Tim Keller, “What Are the Most Common Objections Against Christianity?” January 22, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/q-a-podcast/what-are-the-most-common-objections-against-christianity>.

And if you think that to be an impossible thing, think of your *own* testimony. Were you not included among the vilest of sinners before you turned to Christ? And were you not also blind to it? But even for you, God opened the eyes of your heart so that you could never unsee your need and his grace ever again, and you have never been the same since.

And if he could save a sinner like *you*, then there is *none* too far for him to reach. His arm is not too short, and his heart is not too small.

Conclusion

As we close, we should know that there is nothing even close to Good Friday in any other worldview.

In no other worldview do you find God coming down from heaven to become fully human to experience discouragement, rejection, loneliness, poverty, grief, scorn, torture, and death. And on the cross, his suffering went infinitely beyond even the worst human suffering we could imagine, as he bore the full outpouring of divine wrath for our sins on himself. But *because* he endured such suffering, he is able to *sympathize* with us and *help* us in ways that *nobody* else could. *Because* Jesus is God and he went to the cross, we now have the deepest source of comfort and encouragement to face even the most difficult and discouraging of circumstances.³

In a world filled with discouragement, Good Friday shows us that, in Jesus, our God truly is *with* us and *for* us.

Let's pray.

³ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 30-31, Kindle.