

## **THE CROSS, LOVE'S MEASURE**

**Mark 15:1–47**

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Mark assigns as much material to the crucifixion of the Lord than he does the resurrection. You know that he wants us to experience the agony of Christ if we are to understand the happy ending that occurs on the other side. That His death must have some significance in order for His resurrection to be appreciated. Jesus has come into a world where evil is very much in control. The same way when He entered our life—evil was very much in control. When He entered that world, He began with signs and wonders to declare His identity and we have seen this in the Gospel of Mark.

Just take a deep breath as you plunge into the text of Mark. In Mark 1, you see how, in the synagogue in Capernaum, He reaches out and breaks the power of evil on a demoniac who is sitting in the synagogue. Your heart cheers as you follow Him in Mark 2 and see Him reaching forth to a man who has paralysis and, at the same moment, forgiving his sins, setting him free in the spirit and freeing him in body. Then you move on through the Gospel as in Mark 3 He dares to stand out and take authority over traditions which shackle people and He sets men free from traditions and reaches out to restore a man whose hand is withered. We cheer Him on as He teaches the great throngs in Mark 4 and we're glad that Jesus has a crowd and that, when He opens His mouth, people listen. And in Mark 5, we're absolutely astounded at the authority Jesus has over a demoniac again and even over death, Jairus' daughter is raised and a woman who has a hemorrhaging condition for twelve years is healed. When we have come to that great section on miracles, which spans all of Mark 5 and the last paragraph in Mark 4, and we see Jesus

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looking at the storm and bidding it be still, we ask ourselves with gaping awe, what force is there that He can't control? He has power indeed over all things.

We move along and follow Him as He comes in the Passion Week into the city of Jerusalem.

Mark devotes 40 percent of his Gospel to those last seven days of Christ's experience, which suggests to us again where the level of importance comes. But, as we see Jesus coming into that town, once more we're ready to cheer as He breaks the power of evil, so we think, in a way that exercises some physical authority over force. We are in jubilation, particularly as He marches into the temple area, takes a whip and uses it, not on the backs of those who sold the pigeons and changed the money, but instead, He drives the sheep and the oxen out of the temple; and it looks like finally He's going to establish His authority and we're going to see some action and see evil punished.

In Mark 13, of course, we sit with Him as the disciples did on the Mount of Olives and hear Him quietly speak with calmness of the future and declare there is a kingdom coming and an age coming that indeed He does have control over all the elements and over all of history and, the most important thing of all, is to be related to Him.

Then we come to Mark 14 and 15, and it is as if someone has pulled the plug from His power.

All of a sudden, He is very powerless and weak and evil seems to be very much in control.

We're scandalized by it. For, as we look at it, it seems to describe things very much as they are in the world today. The description of the counsels of the Sanhedrin is an apt description of people who have religion but don't have God. The description of Pilate and his ploys to save his position rather than give it up for the sake of Jesus is again seen; men scramble desperately to try to maintain some kind of level of power and authority. And we see again—don't we?—that the

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cruel in this life really get away unpunished, that there are individuals like the SLA which may never be brought to justice, treating an innocent person as they would like.

I am astounded. I don't know how to preach on the crucifixion. It just seems like everything that would suggest power in the life of Jesus Christ is taken from Him. He stands before the Sanhedrin and, while I'm sure that He's previously demonstrated His power, if He would demonstrate it again, this would be the time to do it. Here was a group which, by their own regulation of procedure, was violating their own laws—meeting at night, trying a capital case without sufficient time for due process, calling the witness to testify against Himself, not being able to have witnesses agree on the evidence, letting the judge be the jury and also do the prosecution. A total miscarriage of justice which finally is seen in all of its hideousness when, in bringing Jesus before the Roman governor, they're no longer saying He's the Messiah, they're putting the political charge on Him—King of the Jews—saying He's guilty of sedition and one of the other Gospels indicate that one of the accusations brought before Pilate was that this man said we shouldn't pay tribute to Caesar, and we know from the Gospels that's an outright lie. He said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21). So we look at that and we say, "Here they are, saying to Pilate, on the one hand, 'You should take care of a person who claims to be against Rome,' but on the other hand, turning right around and releasing Barabbas—asking for his release—for the very same reason that they want a king that they had reputedly rejected Christ on." He's powerless against them.

He comes before Pilate, who up to this time had been governor of Judea already seven years and had three more years to run before he was replaced. He was a person who was desperately scrambling at this point to find some kind of accommodation, it seems. Here is an example of a person who really works hard for compromise and tries to satisfy all parties concerned. The

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satisfaction that He would try to get out of this is to let Jesus off with a scourging, even though He wasn't guilty, at least he would be able to arrive at some kind of consensus. As if consensus was really all that important. As if consensus was more important than doing the right thing. Pilate is in control. Jesus very clearly tells Pilate, in the Gospel of John, that Pilate would have no power if it weren't given to him. Jesus could have easily slipped out of the charge by responding to Pilate in some kind of way that would have let Pilate off the hook. But when Pilate comes up against Jesus, he's forced to decide at that moment. The crisis impels him to declare what kind of man he was.

And crises always do that to us. We don't realize how much crises bring out what is underneath the layer of our personality. When an event occurs that has tremendous consequences for us, if we have, underneath the lining of our life, existed with a kind of get-by attitude, a situational ethics, a climbing over other people, doing things wrong, a bitterness, then, when the rip cord is pulled out from under us and we're left loose on our own, then it comes out. With Pilate it's so. Jesus appears so totally helpless before him.

Then the soldiers—of all the things that Jesus should not have had to bear, it would have been that. They take Him, at Pilate's instructions, and scourge Him. Scourging, of course, was accomplished through the Roman flagellation. Here was a cord of whips—leather thongs. At the end of the leather thongs were tied stones, pieces of glass, sharp objects. A scourging was enough to kill a man. There are instances where scouring kills persons when administered by the Romans. In other instances, a scourging laid the flesh bare so that one could see the bone and skeletal structure. On another occasion, it's been reported that the viscera showed because of the deepness of the scourging. Many a person died from scourging. No wonder, when they're

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through whipping Jesus, later, He cannot even carry His cross. Already the blood is flowing from His life and He is rendered helpless.

Then, following the scourging, the incredible blasphemy and anti-Semitic laughter of the soldiers of Pilate. If the Jews wanted a king, here's about the best they were going to get. And thus Pilate takes the occasion to express his feeling toward the Jews and has the rude jibe "King of the Jews" attached on His cross. The soldiers do the same thing in saying that of Him. Further insulting Him and hurting Him with the reed struck on His face, with the spitting and the slapping and with the robe and the whole cacophony of the blatant sound of rejection. And He doesn't do anything about it. He just takes it.

Then He goes to the cross. And there, He allows the nails to pierce His hands and His feet to be nailed together by the long nail that would fasten both feet simultaneously. And He begins to suffer. He won't even so much as lift His hand to deaden the pain of the cross so that, when they offer Him wine mingled with myrrh, which is kind of an intoxicant that would dull the pain, He doesn't take it. If He is to suffer, then He will suffer in the fullness of suffering. He will drink the dregs of suffering to the depths. He will not go through the experience of the cross on drugs.

And, of course, in an age when drugs are so much a part of the experience, what a fantastic example in the Lord Jesus Christ, who had every reason to take drugs but who refrained because He would live life in dependence upon God.

So He's crucified. Even on the cross, He is further insulted by those who were mocking Him, by the two thieves which were also reviling Him. Luke tells us that one of them evidently changed his mind when he saw the heroic suffering of Jesus. Finally, with that, the darkness descends as Jesus is hanging on the cross; and He appears helpless, even from the vantage point of His relationship with God, His relationship with God appears not strong enough to save Him. "My

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God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34, KJV). True, He could have, at that point, simply been saying those words simply because He didn't have enough strength to say the whole Psalm—Psalm 22—which so eloquently goes past the suffering of Christ to speak of His final triumph and that posterity would serve Him. But, as He says the first words of that Psalm, the immediate impression gained is that, even on the cross, He is without the comfort and the presence of the Father, and from eternity to eternity there had never been a severance between the Son and the Father.

Finally, He laid down His life. He dies and we see some effects that may kind of give rise to a small glimmer of hope. There's an earthquake. The veil of the temple is torn in two—here's a sixty-foot high curtain a handbreadth in thickness, which is just ripped from top to bottom.

Maybe God is concerned about this after all! But nothing really showy beyond that. The centurion, who stands facing Him and sees the heroic way He died, says, “Surely this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39, NIV). In Greek, it doesn't say “the Son of God.” It leaves out the definite article. It's simply, “Truly, this man was son of God” that is here, “was a person who was really heroic.” He didn't die like anybody else. He didn't go out of life cursing like anybody else. He didn't go out of life complaining like anybody else the centurion had ever seen crucified. It was incredible.

But then our hopes sag again as Joseph of Arimathea comes to pick up the body. Lacerated, covered with blood and sweat and spit, taken down from the cross, wrapped in clean linen clothes and buried in a tomb.

What a picture. Alone. Alone.

The question is, why did He do this? Mark, characteristic of him, is so busy telling us the story, he doesn't try to give us the interpretation. Of course, the immediate interpretation is that the

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story ends here and then evil really has won in the world. Then there really is no hope. There's no hope for anybody in this room. There's not one of you I can give any confidence to when you're lying on a death bed, that there's any kind of hope for you. If any of you have an incurable disease, there's no hope I can give you today. If any of you has a problem in your marital experience, there's no hope I can give you today...just if the story ended at Mark 15. There's a contrasting story which I saw this week on television, which kind of suggests how things must have gone. It was a western. I normally don't watch westerns because I know how the story generally is going to end. There are some people who like stories where they know how the story is going to end. But I tuned in because the lead role was being played by a former preacher—Marjoe Gortner. I wanted to see what Marjoe was up to. Marjoe's granddad had been a saint to my own mom and dad, he had been my mom's pastor. Marjoe's granddad had been a person, in the early years of his pastorate, that didn't really know the Lord. When he got up to preach on Sunday morning, he preached from memory. He memorized his sermon on Saturday night. Phenomenal memory. For a year, he preached the Sunday morning sermons that way. He'd learned fifty-two sermons by the end of that time. The next year, he decided to preach on Sunday nights as well. He preached Sunday morning and Sunday night and at the end of two years, he had over a hundred and fifty sermons, then he got saved and filled with the Holy Spirit and really began to preach. But by that time, the Word was hidden in his heart. He was a man of incredible dimensions spiritually.

Then I looked at the tragedy of his son, Marjoe, who really walks away from the experience of Christ because the solution which Christ offers does not appear as neat as the kind of solutions Marjoe is able to propose for the solving of life. Let a person do his own thing, let a person take his chances, let a person say, if he will, that there is no solution to the question of evil, to the

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question of salvation, to the question of death. Let him assume that or let him live as he may well please.

Marjoe, incredibly in this movie on TV, played the role of a preacher. He just somehow seems to be drawn to the part. Like Judas, he finds it difficult to get away from Christ. But he's playing the role of a gun-slinging preacher. Actually, he was a gunslinger before he became a preacher. He had been shooting people up pretty badly and was about to be hanged for one shooting that he evidently didn't commit, but a girl got him off the hook, and he ran out from under the noose and galloped off. And the posse soon found out that he really should be charged after all, and they run out after him. They're chasing him across the wilderness. He comes across a dead man who was dressed in the robe of a cleric and he changes clothes with him, gets on the white collar with the black vest, gets the letter out of the man's pocket from Castle Rock, Arizona, inviting this man to come and pastor the church there. He thought, "Nobody in Castle Rock will know me. I'll go pastor there."

So he rides off another 150-200 miles and comes into the town, and the first thing he encounters is a funeral. And everybody's scared to death at this funeral. Nobody will say a prayer for the deceased. And even though the widow and the girl of about eighteen (naturally) is there, and the rest of the family is there weeping, nobody will say a prayer. The town doesn't have a preacher. And evidently, the head boss of the town is an evil man who has given orders that nobody is to say a prayer or deliver a eulogy or give a sermon at the death of this man who one of his henchmen had shot in the back.

Marjoe comes in and he's all courage. He doesn't know anything about God. He doesn't even know the Scripture. But he comes in and says, "We're going to hold a funeral here." Everybody shakes. They're afraid of the evil man of the town. The reason why they're afraid, ultimately, is

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they're afraid of death. If they thought they could get away with deposing him without dying, they would have, but they're ultimately afraid of death—something the film itself never traces. But Marjoe comes, and two of the henchmen come and, when they see him beginning the funeral, they say he can't do it; and he whips out his gun and shoots off their hats. He gives them time. The men go running. They begin to feel good. At last, someone comes to this town who's going to take care of the evil in this town. It isn't long before other henchmen are sent to try to get Marjoe. He's very aware that playing the preacher role, that he's going to have to be defended at all times. He lacerates the church members for their do-nothing attitude and their cowering fear. When he walks up to the pulpit, he has his Bible on one side and his gun on the other. When some men come to interrupt the church service, he pulls out his gun and shoots their hats off again.

Then, finally, the shoot out comes. Marjoe by this time, has been able to get a few of the townsmen to have some courage. They have a big shoot out, the head honcho is killed, and a number of the henchmen are killed, some of the townspeople are killed as well. Marjoe then has to get out of town because the posse is just about to catch up with Him. He says good bye to the girl and rides out of town. One feels, "Now this town has just what it needed. It has its freedom. The head honcho is dead and the people can relax."

Then I look at Orange County, where there is no head honcho. I see people that aren't free yet. I see people living under a democratic system unlike some of the guys of the old west and I see people are bothered with incredible problems of which they're not relieved. Captivity is a matter of captivity of one's self. As I think more deeply about the film, I ask myself: "What problems, after all, did Marjoe really solve? And why is the way of the cross different from his way?" All of a sudden, I'm forced to the conclusion that it didn't seem necessary for Marjoe, that he didn't

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express any love toward the honcho or the henchmen. That wasn't necessary. He was called to shoot.

But Jesus wasn't called to shoot. Jesus was called to give us life. Jesus was called to proclaim the age of forgiveness. Jesus was called to say to the world that one day He would return in power and redress all the wrongs that had ever been committed. But before a man would ever have to meet God in wrath, he would see God in love.

So Jesus proceeds, in Mark 14 and 15, to let his life simply be lived without any expression of supernatural power. We have seen, throughout His life, His power. So we're not in any doubt as Christians, as we read Mark 14 and 15, that He could have taken power but He didn't, which suggests that the real purpose of the cross is to not tell us how great God's power is but how great God's love is. We could never know that without the cross. Even though Pilate and the Sanhedrin mistreated and killed Jesus, Jesus wouldn't let them get away without knowing that He was willing to lay down His life even for His enemies.

Romans 5 indicates to us that, for a righteous man, one would scarcely give his life; but look at the Son of God who gave Himself for the ungodly. All of this begins to suggest to me a kind of a way and pattern that God has designed for this age. We, like the disciples, have a rough time believing Jesus when He says "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). We have a rough time believing Him when He says, "In this age I am not going to set all the wrongs right... in this age I have simply come to set the captive free, to set the person free who wants to be free, who needs My love." On the cross, He's expressing His love for us. You say, but how do I know that He did anything for me on the cross?

There's a lot going on on the cross that you cannot see except by faith. If you're just looking at the cross from a physical dimension, you will never see, for example, that when Christ suffered

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on the cross, He was also in the Spirit presenting His blood before the throne of God and using it as a covering for all of those who would need it to be free from sin. You do not see, on the cross, the intercession and the place which He literally stood—your place which He stood in. That is something, which you take by faith, and you take it by faith because later He demonstrates by His resurrection that He really is Lord.

How do you respond to evil? Do you want to shoot the person who is against you? Annihilate the marriage partner you are living with? Seek some kind of a harsh attitude toward a brother or a sister who you are having a disagreement with?

Jesus points us to the cross, ever and ever to the cross, to say that, more important than getting even with a person is to show that person your love. You take the chance of being rejected as Jesus. But every man is owed the opportunity to see the God of love. And every person who you come in contact with is further owed the opportunity to see God's love flowing through your life.

Let us pray.

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Lord, today we gather in this building; it's been a long time since the cross has reared its ugly head on the physical map of the universe. It's been a long time since Calvary. Because it's been so long, we see how the impact of it sometimes lessens over the course of the years. But in this moment, we judge our values by the values and the goals which You held. We look within our lives, we look around us at the persons closest to us. We're asking, Lord, today how we can apply Your great love to our own situations. How we can—instead of lashing and hurting and killing—heal and bind up and restore. As yet, Lord, we do not understand all the mystery that's associated with the cross. It's too big. It staggers us. It's not in the wisdom of men. It's something we could not have figured out. It's something we still have a difficult time grasping

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and understanding. But we can never say, Lord Jesus, when we're through looking at the cross, that You didn't love us. That is one thing we can always know for sure—that You loved us. And if we had been the very person who was most responsible for Your death, You, by the cross, would have offered us full amnesty upon the confession of our sin when we realized it had been committed. And You give us now the chance to meet You in love before we meet You in judgment. So we praise You for the blood of the cross. We give thanks and glory in Your name today through Jesus!