

The Message of the Cross: Tragedy or Triumph?

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[0 : 00] Well, would you take your Bibles and turn with me to Mark's Gospel at chapter 15. If you have one of the church visitors' Bibles, that's page 853.

Otherwise, it's at the beginning of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, second of the Gospels. We're going to be looking especially at the section verses 33 to 39, but I'm going to read from verse 21.

So Mark 15 at verse 21. And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country.

The father of Alexander and Rufus compelled him to carry his cross. And they brought him to the place called Golgotha, which means place of a skull.

And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them to decide what each should take.

[1 : 13] And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, The King of the Jews. And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.

And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, Aha, you who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross. So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, He saved others. He cannot save himself.

Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe. And those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?

[2 : 25] Which means, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Some of the bystanders hearing it said, Behold, he's calling Elijah. And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come and take him down.

And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

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.

Amen. And may God bless to us this, his word. I invite you to take your Bibles and to turn with me again to Mark chapter 15.

Mark chapter 15, which you will find in page 853 of the church Bible. That's page 853, Mark chapter 15. I know it's as you do, so let me just say a word of prayer.

[3 : 54] Oh, teach me, Lord, its meaning, that cross uplifted high, with one the man of sorrows condemned to bleed and die. Oh, teach me what it costs you to make a sinner whole.

And teach me, Savior, teach me the value of a soul. And to that end, we pray that what we know not, you would teach us. What we have not, you would give us.

And what we are not, you would make us. For Jesus' sake. Amen. The message of the cross.

Tragedy or triumph? How would you view the cross? What is the message of the cross of Jesus Christ for you?

Is it one of tragedy? Or is it one of triumph? One of tragedy would certainly seem to be the view of a lot of folks, even folks that are church attenders.

[4 : 55] They don't see any meaning to the death of Jesus. In fact, it all seems just rather pointless to them. Edward Lobb once told me that he was greeting folks at the door one morning after

preaching.

I don't know if it was here right enough, so I don't know if it was. And an older lady said to him, You know, I've often thought about that boy Jesus and his death on the cross. And I've always thought, What a waste of such a promising life.

If only he could have lived till he was 50 or 60. Just think of all the good he could have done. What a tragedy. John Taylor also told me of a story of a Japanese woman, I think it was, who was reading through the gospel for the first time, not knowing anything of the story beforehand.

How I would like to read the gospel at that. But she was reading through the gospel for the first time, not knowing anything of the story beforehand. And when she came to the part of the story that we have before us this evening, the crucifixion.

When she came to the crucifixion, she was heartbroken. She was absolutely devastated. So devastated that she couldn't read on. She was so disturbed that life for Jesus had ended this way.

[6 : 13] It seemed such a tragedy to her. That the Jesus she had been discovering in the gospel should bow out like this. Such a tragedy.

Now, friends, one could be forgiven for thinking this way, that the cross is a tragedy. For as we come to the 15th chapter of Mark, and to the verses that we have before us this evening, for these verses bring to an end the last week of Jesus' life.

Mark devotes six chapters to the last week of Jesus' life, more than a third of his gospel. And this was a week that had begun amid scenes of great triumph, back in Mark chapter 11, which is entitled in our Bibles, The Triumphal Entry.

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem after three years of public ministry, for what will be the last week of his life? And he arrives amid scenes of triumph.

People had spread their cloaks in the road before Jesus. Others had spread leafy branches in the road. There was people who were going ahead, and people who were going behind. And they were all shouting.

[7 : 23] They were shouting, Hosanna! Praise! Hosanna! Save! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David.

Hosanna in the highest! Scenes of great triumph. As the crowds believed that in Jesus, the kingdom of God would now be ushered in. And they were shouting, Hosanna!

And praise! To God! But less than a week later, crowds are shouting again at Jesus. But this time it's not, Hosanna!

Praise! No! No, this time it's, It's crucify him! Crucify him! Chapter 15, verse 10. Pilate perceived that it was out of envy, that the chief priests had delivered Jesus up.

But the chief priests stood up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. And Pilate again said to them, Then what shall I do with the man you call the king of the Jews?

[8 : 24] And they cried out again, Crucify him! And Pilate said to them, Why? What evil has he done? But they shouted all the more, Crucify him!

So Pilate, Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Release for them Barabbas. And having scourged, Flogged Jesus, He delivered him over, To be crucified.

And so as we come to our verses this evening, It seems that the hopes of the people, The hopes of the nation, That Jesus was the one to usher in the kingdom of God, It seems that those hopes, Have been dealt a death blow, Along with Jesus.

What seems so promising, Has ended, In great tragedy. Now I suppose friends, On one level, The cross is a great tragedy. The apostle Paul, When preaching in Acts chapter 3, Says, But you denied the holy and righteous one, And asked for a murderer to be granted to you, And you killed, The author of life.

So on one level, The cross is a great tragedy. But Mark, Mark the evangelist, Mark the preacher, Wants us to see, That the message of the crosses, Is not one of great tragedy, But one of great triumph.

[9 : 51] I hope that as we go through these verses together, We will see that this is Mark's interpretation of the events, Not mine. And that the message of the cross, That Mark intended to convey to us, Was a message of great triumph.

And so I would like to take the passage, Under three headings. Firstly we have in verse 33, God is angry. God is angry. Secondly in verses 34 to 36, Jesus is abandoned.

Jesus is abandoned. And thirdly in verses 37 to 39, We can be accepted. Or, We can have access. Well firstly then, Verse 33, God is angry.

In the lead up to our verses, Mark has shown us, All that Jesus has suffered at the hands of men.

He has been betrayed by, By Judas, One of his disciples.

He has been arrested. All of his closest friends have, Have run away and left him. He's been tried in a kangaroo court, By the chief priests and the whole council.

[11 : 02] Where people have, Have borne false witness against him. He has been condemned to death by them, For telling the truth. He has been punched, Kicked, Spat upon and mocked.

He has been rejected by his own people, Who have called for him to be executed. He has been handed over to the Romans, Who have flogged him. And Roman soldiers, Well, They've had their fun too.

Mocking him too. Putting a purple robe over him. A crown of thorns has been woven together, And pushed onto his head. And the Roman soldiers have kneeled mockingly, Hailing him as the king of the Jews.

They have also struck him on the head, Spat upon him also. He has been nailed, Hand and foot to the cross. The mocking, And the taunting, And the abuse continues.

It's relentless. It's relentless from the passers by. The chief priests and the scribes. And even the criminals that have been crucified with him, Have also rebelled him, And abused him.

[12 : 15] Verse 25 tells us that it was the third hour when they crucified him. And as we come to verse 33, And to the sixth hour, Jesus has already hung on the cross for three hours.

And now Mark turns as it were. He turns saying, Yes, Man has done all this to Jesus. But now, But now it's God's turn.

Verse 33, And when the sixth hour had come, There was darkness over the whole land, Until the ninth hour. The Jewish clock ran a wee bit different from ours.

Six a.m. was the first hour. So Jesus was hung on the cross from 9 a.m. verse 25, Until 12 noon. The sixth hour, Verse 33.

12 noon is when the sun would be at its highest point in the sky. But it's at this time, That Mark tells us there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

[13 : 17] That for the three hours between 12 noon and 3 p.m., There was darkness over the whole land. You can feel the eeriness, can't you?

There was maybe the sounds of wee birds singing. But this untimely eeriness, This untimely darkness, Darkness, Has put an end to all that.

All is quiet. All is eerie. Well, what caused the darkness? Was it a solar eclipse? We had one of those earlier this year.

Was it a solar eclipse? Well, even a solar eclipse doesn't last for three hours. It lasts a few minutes at tops. Well, what caused the darkness? Well, whatever it was that caused the darkness, Mark wants us to see that it wasn't normal.

It was supernatural. It was ordained by God. And friends, No Jew, No Jew would be confused to what the darkness meant. Darkness, Especially darkness in the middle of the day, Was a sign of God's presence.

[14 : 24] And his judgment. A sign of God's presence. And his anger. The Old Testament is full of this. Joel chapter 2. The sun shall be turned to darkness, And the moon to blood, Before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

And also from Zephaniah, The great day of the Lord is near. Near and hastening fast. The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter. The mighty man cries aloud there.

A day of wrath is that day. A day of distress and anguish. A day of ruin and devastation. A day of darkness and gloom. A day of clouds.

And thick darkness. And probably most vividly, From Amos, Chapter 8, Verse 9, Which we were looking at with Edward, Just the other week.

And on that day, Declares the Lord, I will make the sun go down at noon, And darken the earth, And broad daylight. No Jew would be confused, About what this darkness meant.

[15 : 32] They knew that this darkness meant, That God's presence was here, And his judgment, And his anger. God's wrath and anger are being poured out. But where is God's wrath and anger being poured out?

Well, Mark wants us to say, That God's wrath and anger is being poured out. But it is being poured out, Upon Jesus. God is angry.

But secondly, In verses 34 to 36, Jesus is abandoned. Jesus is abandoned. God is angry. But it is Jesus who is abandoned, As God's wrath is poured out upon him.

That is what Mark wants us to understand in these verses. In fact, That's what Jesus wants us to understand. That's why he cries out as he does, These agonizing, Awful words of Psalm 22.

My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me? Didn't Jesus know what was happening? Did this all come as a shock to Jesus? Well, no, Not at all.

[16 : 34] All through Mark's gospel, Jesus has told his disciples, On more than one occasion, The fate that awaited him in Jerusalem. He told them back in chapter 8, Verse 31.

Again in chapter 9, Verse 9. Chapter 9, Verse 30. And most vividly, And descriptive, In chapter 10, Verse 32. And they were on the road, Going up to Jerusalem.

And Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed. And those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, Jesus began to teach them What was going to happen to him. Saying, See, We are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man Will be delivered over to the chief priests And the scribes. And they will condemn him to death.

And deliver him over to the Gentiles, The Romans. And they will mock him. And spit on him. And flog him. And kill him. And after three days, He will rise.

[17 : 34] Jesus totally understood What would happen in Jerusalem. And the fate that awaited him there. But he cries out these words from Psalm 22, So that we will understand what is happening.

Jesus quotes these words from Psalm 22, That were written some 1,000 years earlier. And if you were to go home tonight, And compare Psalm 22 and Mark chapter 15, You would see how very similar they are.

Psalm 22 describes the Lord's anointed king, Who is being scorned, Being mocked and despised by all who see him. But worse than all of that, He feels he has been abandoned by God himself.

My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me? From the words of my groaning? Oh my God, I cry by day, But you do not answer.

And by night, But I find no rest. That's what Mark wants us to understand, Is happening on the cross. The darkness represents God the Father's anger.

[18 : 43] And the cry represents the Son of God's abandonment. As God's anger for sin is poured out upon him. But why would God's punishment for sin be poured out in Jesus?

Why is that happening, you may ask? Jesus didn't do anything to deserve punishment from men. That was Pontius Pilate's conclusion. He perceived that it was out of envy the chief priest had brought Jesus to him.

His assessment was that Jesus was innocent of any crime. Saying in response to the crowd, Why? What evil has he done? That's what it was that shocked John Taylor's friend, As she read through Mark's gospel.

How could Jesus be delivered up to die a criminal's death? He hadn't done anything wrong. And if man could find no fault in Jesus, Then neither could God.

Remember back in Mark chapter 1, And the baptism of Jesus. As soon as Jesus came out of the water, The heavens were torn open, The Spirit descended on him like a dove, And God the Father's voice belled from heaven, You are my beloved Son.

[19 : 57] With you, I am well pleased. Jesus had done no wrong, In the eyes of God the Father. With you, I am well pleased.

No, Jesus wasn't abandoned for his sin. He had none. Remember the hymn we sang earlier? Yes, finished. The Messiah dies.

Cut off for sins, But not his own. Jesus was abandoned by God, For the sins of others. That's what Jesus understood his death to be about.

Do you remember the words he spoke back in Mark chapter 10, verse 45? For even the Son of Man came not to be served, But to serve, And to give his life, As a ransom for many.

Jesus knew, Jesus knew, That his death, And the judgment and anger of God, That he would face, At his death, Was on the behalf of others.

[20 : 59] He knew God's wrath, Anger and wrath for sin, Would be poured out on him on the cross. That's what makes any sense, Of why he was so much troubled, In the garden of Gethsemane.

Not because of what he knew, He would experience at the hands of men. No. But because of what he knew, He would experience, At the hands of God, For human sin.

That's why he prayed that this cup, The cup of God's wrath, May be removed from him. He was asking, Is there no other way for sin to be paid for? Is there no other way for human beings to be forgiven?

And the answer was no. No other way. No other way for God's anger to be dealt with. The only way for the anger of the Father, Was through the abandonment, And the anguish of the Son.

Well I still don't understand, What this death of Jesus means for me. You might say, What does it accomplish for me? Well Mark tells us, In our final verses, Verses 37 to 39, We can be accepted.

[22 : 13] Or, We can have access. Verse 37, And Jesus uttered a loud cry, And breathed his last.

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

Jesus cries out again in verse 37, But this time it's not a cry of abandonment, Or a cry of agony. No, It is a cry of victory.

And Jesus uttered a loud cry, And breathed his last. Mark doesn't tell us what these last words of Jesus were, But John in his gospel does.

The last words were, It is finished. It is finished. The Greek word for this is, Is tetalestai. Not that I've been studying Greek, I'll leave that to Rupert, But I remember it from Christianity Explode.

[23 : 25] Tetalestai means, It is finished. It is paid in full. It is accomplished. Well, What is it, That is finished?

What is it, That has been accomplished? Well, Mark tells us in verse 38, And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, From top to bottom.

Now, Why would Mark tell us about a curtain in the temple? Why would he take our eyes off Jesus, And bring us right back into the city of Jerusalem, Into the temple? Why would he take our eyes off the cross, And take us to the curtain?

Why would Mark do that? Well, It's all to do with what that curtain represented. That curtain was 60 foot high, And 30 foot wide.

The size of 25 full length snooker tables. And it was about 7 inches thick. And what it did was, It separated the holiest place in the temple from the world.

[24 : 27] It separated the place where God himself dwelt. The curtain said, Danger, Do not enter. This far and no further.

Even to the Israelites, God's chosen people. It was a barrier that sought to remind everyone, That we are separated from God, Because of our sin.

Isaiah 59, But your iniquities have made a separation, Between you and your God. And this separation that exists between man and God, Has been man's plight since the very first sin entered the world, When man rebelled.

This goes right back to Genesis 3. Man cast out of the garden by God, Separated from him. And God placed the cherubim, And a flaming sword that turned every way, To guard the way to the tree of life, And to bar man's access.

And that's what that curtain represented. Because the cherubim, And the flaming sword were, Embroidered on the curtain. That's what it represented.

[25 : 33] Thus far and no further. Danger. No entry. No access to God. Why? Because sin separates us from God.

But Mark tells us that this is no longer the case. Because in the death of Jesus, The curtain has been torn in two from top to bottom, From heaven to earth.

And the way to God is no longer barred. There is now access to God. And acceptance with God. We can now enter his presence. That's what the writer to the book of Hebrews understood.

Listen to this. Therefore, brothers, Since we have confidence to enter the holy places, By the blood of Jesus, By the new and living way that he has opened up for us, Through the curtain, That is through his flesh.

See friends, that's what the death of Jesus means. It means that through his abandonment by God, We can have acceptance with God. Because of the anguish that he faced, We can now have access.

[26 : 44] Jesus on the cross became our substitute. Just like in a game of football, Jesus took our place. But unlike in a game of football, Jesus also took our punishment.

He took our place, And our punishment. The apostle Paul writes in Galatians, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, By becoming a curse for us.

And again the apostle writes in 2 Corinthians, For our sake, God made Jesus to be sin, Who knew no sin, So that in Jesus, We might become the righteousness of God.

A friend once told me, That for something to become clean, Something else had to become dirty. You wash your dirty face in the morning, The water in the sink is clean, But when you wash your face, The water becomes dirty, And your face is now clean.

There has been a transfer, An exchange has taken place. Well friends, That's what's happening on the cross. Jesus becomes dirty, With our sin, So that we who are dirty with sin, Might by trusting him, Become clean.

[28 : 02] God's anger for sin, Is poured out in Jesus, His perfect son. He is abandoned, So that sinners, Like you, And like me, Might have access to God, And be accepted by him.

What Mark is saying, I suppose, Is summed up in the words, Of a song that Gary Brotherston wrote. Thinking of the cross, He writes, When I think of all you've done for me, How you bled and died, In that cursed tree, When I think of all that you went through, So that I, For the first time, Could come close to you.

You see friends, The cross brings, Not just forgiveness to the believer, But also allows us, For the first time, To come close to God. It brings not just forgiveness, But also fellowship.

The apostle Peter writes, For Christ also suffered, Once for sins, The righteous for the unrighteous, That he might bring us to God. Mark is saying, That in the great tragedy of Jesus' death, Is also the great triumph of Jesus' death, Winning, Securing forgiveness from God, And fellowship with God, For those that he came to save.

That's the message of the cross. And who is it that gets it? The chief priests? No. The disciples? No.

[29 : 34] No, it's a, It's a pagan soldier. Verse 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.

Once I was blind, Yet believed I saw everything. But now in the darkness, He does see, For the first time. It's a pagan soldier, Who gets it.

So there we have it friends. The message of the cross, As preached to us by Mark, God is angry, But Jesus is abandoned, And we can have access, We can be accepted by God.

I began this evening, By asking how you viewed the cross. Did you see it as a tragedy? Or did you see it as a triumph? Mark wants us to see, That at one level, The cross is a great tragedy.

But in the great tragedy of the cross, Is also the great triumph of the cross. But friends, Do you know, What I think would be, The biggest tragedy of all?

[30 : 50] I think the biggest tragedy of all, Would be this, That after hearing this message, That Mark has preached to us tonight, The message of the cross, You do nothing with it.

It doesn't become a message, For you personally, That you don't trust Jesus' abandonment, To deal with God's anger for your sin, And therefore, You can never be forgiven.

You can never have fellowship with God. That I think, Would be the greatest tragedy of all. But if you do respond, No matter how bad your life has been, No matter what you've done, No matter where you've been, The cross of Jesus, Will become a great triumph for you.

At the cross of Jesus, Even though I be, The worst of all the sinners, There is hope for me, Judged, condemned, And guilty, I am lost indeed, But the cross of Jesus, Meets my deepest need.

That's the great message. That's the great triumph, Of the cross. Let us pray. And when the sixth hour had come, There was darkness over the whole land, Until the ninth hour, And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried out, My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?

[32 : 23] And Jesus uttered a loud cry, And briefed his last, And the curtain of the temple, Was torn in two, From top to bottom. Father, we come, Knowing that we are those, Fully deserving of your anger.

We come in the name of Jesus, Thanking you and praising you, For the abandonment, That he faced on our behalf. That through the, Great abandonment of Jesus on the cross, Through his death, We may have life, And that we may have access to you, Our heavenly Father.

We pray, Lord, That, Maybe they would leave this building the night, Without knowing that access.
Knowing that access, That only the agony, The anguish, And the abandonment of Jesus can bring.
We pray this would be true for us all, In Jesus name. Amen.