

Jason Upchurch - Mark 15:33-39 - The Good News of Jesus's Death

We come to the actual death of Jesus this morning in our study through Mark's gospel. And except for the resurrection of Jesus, the death of Jesus is really the most anticipated part of the work of Jesus.

The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. How does he seek and save? It's through his incarnation and death. And ultimately his resurrection and ascension confirm for us that his death was accepted by God as a sacrifice for us.

Now, on the one hand the death of Jesus is foundational for our faith - I'll say more about that in a minute.

But on the other hand Jesus's death is very confusing for those who are not Christians. And I think it's important for us to remember just how radical Christianity is and the claims we make are. It's easy to become comfortable with our beliefs so much so that we often forget what it's like for an outsider.

I remember once talking to a family member who really didn't understand much about Christianity wondering why we talk so much about blood. And we even sing about blood. Blood is gruesome and graphic. Because for us blood has significance.

Others struggle with the very idea that Jesus died at all. We worship a God who died. That's a hard pill to swallow for some people. How does God die? Well, that's not the entire picture, is it? The actual truth is much more complicated than that.

We worship the God-Man. We worship the second person of the holy Trinity, God the Son, who took on flesh and in his **human nature** died. His divine nature didn't die, his human nature died. The divine nature of the Father, Son, and Spirit can't die - they are the one eternal God from whom all life flows.

When you start explaining the core beliefs of Christianity there's a sense in which we just add mystery to mystery. Not mystery in the sense that we can't describe it. But mystery in the sense that we'll never understand the depth of it all. I can tell people the ocean is deep and vast, but there's really no way to explain that in a way that does it justice.

The same is true with much of what we believe. Especially about Jesus. Christ, in his human nature did die but not in his divine nature.

Which brings up another interesting question: Why does the death of Jesus matter for us? When I was in high school I knew that Jesus died. I knew that there was a guy who hung on the cross and was killed and went into the tomb and came out. But what I didn't understand is what that had to do with me.

How does a Jewish man who claims to be God affect my life? How is that related to whether or not someone goes to heaven or hell after they die?

Again, for most of us, those are pretty elementary issues. But I want to remind you that for a lot of the unbelieving world who doesn't know the storyline of the Bible, these are very relevant questions.

So let me talk about 2 aspects of Jesus's death here before we unpack this section. The first is sacrifice, the second is atonement. And they're 2 ways of looking at the same thing.

1) Sacrifice: One way to look at the death of Jesus is of sacrifice. Starting in Genesis 3, what we see is that when someone sins they are accountable to God. Because God is holy, he requires that the one who who sins dies. It doesn't even really matter the sin. It could be murder, it could be adultery, it could be stealing, it could be eating fruit from a tree he told you not to eat of. The actual sin itself is a little beside the point, what matters is that we have committed treason against a God who is perfectly holy. And that perfectly holy and just God is right to demand our death for that rebellion.

Rom. 6:23: The apostle says the wages of sin is what? Death.

But, God had provided a way for those who sin to not die. They could take an animal - the best and perfect animal possible - and they could kill the animal in their place. It was a substitute. The animal died in their place for their sins. So they would lay their hand on the animal to signify that their guilt and sin passed to the animal, then they would slaughter the animal before God.

The animal was a sacrifice. It was costly to the person. They had to provide the biggest and best and most pristine animal they could before God to die in their place.

God did this with Adam and Eve. We see it with Cain and Abel. And we see it throughout the OT. Usually when we think of sacrifice we think of the very elaborate system God put in place through Moses for the Tabernacle and Temple. This kind of animal for this kind of sin. This type of sacrifice for this specific situation.

Fast forward through time, it became clear that the animals never really could take the sin of people. How could they? The life of a goat is not the same as the life of a human. In fact 100 goats aren't worth the price of a life of a human.

Heb. 10:4: The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin.

What people were looking forward to was something bigger and greater.

And that bigger and greater substitutionary sacrifice was Jesus. The Son of God took on flesh - he was made like us. That's why he became fully human in every way: so he could actually take our place.

And the one sacrificing isn't us. In the OT the sinner would bring their own sheep or bull or goat to offer to God. It would cost the sinner greatly to cover over their sins. But in the NT we don't bring the sacrifice. What could we possibly offer? You know who sacrifices? The Father. The Father sacrifices his only Son.

So what's happening on the cross is substitutionary sacrifice. Jesus is suffering in the place of all his people. He is dying the death we deserve. He is sacrificing himself and the Father is giving his Son so that we might live.

2) Atonement; and it's very much related to sacrifice. But atone focuses more on the one who is wronged. In this case, it was the Father who was wronged because of our sin. Atonement is payment to satisfy wrath. These concepts are related, but there is important distinction. The Father wasn't up in heaven just shrugging his shoulders about our sin. He wasn't indifferent about our sin.

The psalmist says God is every day angry with the wicked. The wicked are an abomination to God. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness.

So as Jesus is suffering and then dies, what he is doing is satisfying the just wrath of God. The Father wasn't wrong to be angry because of our sin. The Father is 100% in the right to be angry. He should be angry because his creatures have rebelled against him, the holy, good, loving God who made them. And so his wrath is kindled and ready to be poured out on every sinner for all eternity in hell.

What Jesus is doing as he dies is completely shielding us from the wrath of God. He is absorbing for us the power of the eternal wrath of God so that no wrath gets through to us. And on the cross the wrath of God toward his people is satisfied.

And just to be clear: the wrath of God is only satisfied for those who believe in Jesus. It is only through faith in Jesus that anyone is shielded from the wrath of God. Those who are outside the faith are so doomed, Paul says they are children of wrath:

Eph. 2:3: we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Anyone who is outside of the faith is a child of wrath. Their birthright and destiny is wrath. And there's nothing that will shield them from it.

A million sacrificed goats will not shield anyone from the wrath of God.

Being nice to your neighbor and generous to your community will not shield anyone from the wrath of God.

Going to church, reading your Bible, praying won't shield you from the wrath of God.

There's only one shield: The Lord Jesus Christ. How does he shield us?

It's when we trust that he is the only shield. It's believing that what is happening in this one amazing paragraph is of cosmic significance. That Jesus is dying in our place for our sin and satisfies the wrath of God that we deserve.

If anyone ever wondered whether or not God cares about our sin, all you need to do is look to the cross. God is so angry with our sin that the only way to appease him is the death of his own Son.

That's why his death matters. This description in this one paragraph is what has earned for us eternal life, eternal sonship, and blessings beyond measure.

Sacrifice and atonement. That's what is happening as Mark is describing Jesus's final hours. Now, Mark actually paints for us his own theological themes that I want to spend the rest of our time thinking through.

1) God's judgment is visible. **Read 33**

Jesus spent about 6 hours actually hanging on the cross. Sometime late morning - between maybe 9am and noon - Jesus was put onto the cross and hung there.

The Jewish day began at approximately 6am. So the 3rd hour was 9am, the 6th hour noon, the 9th hour was 3pm.

So from about 9am to 3pm Jesus hung on the cross. Now, people could hang on the cross for several days before they died. And many often did. They would eventually die from exposure and exhaustion. Here Jesus dies in a mere 4-6 hours, relatively short which is why Pilate is surprised later in the passage to find Jesus died so quickly.

But as he hangs in the air a supernatural thing happens: the whole land goes dark. **Read 33**

What does that mean? Probably the most well known event where land is covered in darkness is the 9th plague in Egypt where God strikes Egypt with darkness for 3 days. The darkness is so vivid that the Bible says the people could feel the darkness.

Darkness is often a means of judgment of God in the OT.

Deut 28:29: one of the curses God would bring on Israel for disobedience was "groping at noonday, as the blind grope in darkness."

Amos and Jeremiah also threaten darkness for disobedience to the Lord. That may just be a foreboding trouble, but here there is literal darkness in all the land.

What caused the darkness? Well, it wasn't an eclipse. It couldn't have been because Passover is on a new moon. There is no natural way to explain the darkness - and Mark certainly doesn't try to. He seems to think we'll understand that the darkness is being supernaturally caused by God. It's God's displeasure and God's anger.

Which begs the question: who is God angry at? What is the focus of his displeasure? I think the displeasure of God is aimed at Jesus. Why Jesus?

2 Cor. 5:21: For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Isa 53:6: The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.

As the Son is dying on the cross, the Father looks at him as the most wretched, abomination the created world has ever known.

Imagine every vile sinful act you can think of, every murderer, rapist, thief, reviler, blasphemer, arrogant swindler, child abductor, everything. And imagine there was one person who committed all of those sins over and over for thousands of years. Imagine how utterly disgusted and vengeful you would feel toward them.

That's how the Father viewed Jesus on the cross.

1 Pet. 2:24: He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.

That's how the Father looked on the Son. The fury of God's good and righteous judgement that we deserved was aimed fully at his Son and I think the darkness over the land was a visible show of the displeasure he took for us.

2) The Son is Forsaken. Read 34

I mentioned last time that this is a quote from **Psalms 22** and that often times there is some weird theology that comes as a result of this phrase "forsaken me."

We know that God is one. We worship one God in three persons. We don't worship 3 gods. There's only one God so God cannot separate from himself. There's no dividing God.

So then what does it mean when Jesus says "Why have you forsaken me?" I think it means a couple things.

A) I think it's Jesus connecting his death to **Psalms 22**. Jesus is making it clear that what he's living out is the fulfillment of David's psalm. He's not quoting the whole psalm - he doesn't have to. He just quotes the first verse to alert us to the significance of his death.

B) I think this is Jesus is helping us understand that what is happening is primarily between him and the Father. This isn't just an unjust death at the hands of Rome. It's not the short end of the stick from the Jewish religious leaders. It's not the fickle crowds that have determined his fate.

No, what he's doing has divine significance. There is business happening on the cross and Jesus makes it clear that what's happening on the cross is something between him and the Father. Sacrifice and atonement that we learn about from other parts of the Bible is clearly at work and Jesus knows it and he wants his hearers to know it.

C) I think this is also an insight into what Jesus is actually experiencing emotionally. For all eternity past the Son of God has only ever known the love and kindness and goodness of the Father. Their relationship has only been one of harmony and joy and affection. But here in this last day of his life, the last hours of torture and suffering and the final hours of gasping for air, Jesus is experiencing from the Father something he's never experienced before: God's own wrath.

There is a feeling of abandonment. A feeling of loss and death and wrath and displeasure from the Father for the first and only time in all eternity.

What the Son experiences on the cross he's never experienced before and will never experience again.

And here's the amazing thing: because he tasted death for us, we will never experience that.

Do you understand that? If you're in Christ you will never feel from the Father what Christ felt. You will never experience the full blazing force of God's wrath. You will never be abandoned by God. He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Jesus did all of that for us.

So we have the curse of darkness, the feeling of forsakenness.

3) The Bystanders are confused. Read 34-36

We're not told who the bystanders are standing around the cross as Jesus is dying, but what we do know is that there's some confusion. Mark gives us the translation. Apparently the bystanders don't know the language that Jesus spoke from the cross. They hear "Eloi, Eloi" and they think that Jesus is calling for "Elijah, Elijah."

Jesus was actually quoting **Psalm 22**, saying "My God, my God" but they didn't know that. So they hear this and they think that maybe Jesus is hoping Elijah will come rescue him. After all, Elijah is supposed to come and restore all things. They missed that Elijah had already come: John the Baptist.

Instead they decide to offer Jesus some sour wine. It would have been a hyssop branch dunked in wine. It would have been like drinking wine from a cat tale reed or something. Not ideal, but it was a way to hoist some wine to the elevated place on the cross.

One of the things that often happened as people died from crucifixion was delirium and confusion. The body is in shock, it's breaking down and the pain is unbearable.

What is amazing is that Jesus has all of his mental faculties all the way until the end. He knows exactly what is happening and the spiritual significance of his death. The bystanders might be confused, but Jesus is fully aware of everything that's happening.

4) The groaning death of Jesus. Read 37

Although the other gospels record the words that Jesus spoke as he died - "it is finished," "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" - Mark records the way he said it. He groaned it out loudly. And then he breathed his last.

The wrath of the Father had been fully expended on Jesus. He drank down every last drop of wrath and then it was over. He was faithful until his final moment to be obedient to the Father.

5) The Temple is Useless. Read 38

As I was thinking about this this last week, I think this is one of the most significant parting shots Jesus made.

Jesus was crucified within sight of the Temple. As he died, he likely could have easily seen the bright beautiful Temple rising above the walls around Jerusalem. As Peter commented just a few nights before: it would have been a beautiful sight. But the sight wouldn't last because God in his judgement would tear it down so that no stone would be left on another. That all happened in 70AD.

And almost in a similar way, as Jesus died in darkness in the middle of the day the Temple would have been lit up. And I think there's 2 messages of the veil splitting.

One is that it's a preview of coming attractions. The whole Temple will be destroyed, but on Jesus's way out he's begun to judge the Temple.

People would have made the connection between Jesus's death and the curtain splitting. Matthew also records that there were other phenomenon happening as well: earthquakes, rocks were splitting.

The scene would have been absolutely surreal. Pure darkness as Jesus cries out, earthquaking, rocks around splitting and then he dies and the curtain tears.

The more important significance here is that the way to the holy place is now open. No longer does anyone need a Temple to get to God. You don't need to go to some earthly priest and sacrifice some animal in Jerusalem because Jesus is our high priest, he is our lamb, he is our Temple and the OT sacrificial system is now rendered useless.

Hebrews 8 says it's was obsolete and ready to vanish away. Well it's gone.

And although there are people who believe that it will be rebuilt before Jesus returns the reality is that if it is it will be just as much an offense to God in the future as it was in Jesus's day. Because if it is built it will be built as an utter rejection of Jesus and what he's done.

The only sacrifice that matters from now into eternity is the one Jesus died for us.

And to show the finality of his sacrifice, God tore the curtain from top to bottom. This was the curtain that separated the holy place from the most holy place. This was the final curtain the high priest would go through once a year on the day of atonement to sprinkle blood on the Mercy Seat. But it's not needed anymore. Atonement - true atonement - has been made in Jesus.

6) The Centurion is Saved. **Read 39**

I think this is interesting and profound all at the same time. The way in which Jesus died surprised the Centurion. What was it about his death that convinced him that he was the Son of God? I'm not sure there was any one thing.

It may have been his words. It could have been the groaning. The manner in which he suffered.

But I think it's interesting that whatever it was was significantly different than any who had ever suffered before.

And this Centurion had likely seen many, many people die on the cross. But Jesus was different. His entire life, up to his very last breath was so different that in the moments after he died this man saw and believed.

This Centurion is our brother in the Lord. We'll meet him one day and ask about the specifics of what he saw on the cross that convinced him Jesus was the Son of God.

But you know what? What matters is that he believed. He believed that as he hung on the cross Jesus was and is the Son of God.

I've had people tell me over the years they think they're too bad of a sinner to be saved. How can God save them? Look at all the bad stuff they've done.

Listen, if God can save the one who pounded the nails into the hands and feet of Jesus, he can save anyone.

Hallelujah, what a Savior.

Pray