

Mark 15

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Preacher: John Ross

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn back to Mark chapter 15. It would be helpful to have that open in front of us this evening.

We're looking to the cross. In Philippians, in one place, the Apostle Paul writes these words, Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world is crucified to me and I to the world.

On the face of it, the Apostle Paul had many reasons to boast, plenty of reasons to talk about himself and his own very considerable accomplishments.

In fact, in Philippians 3, he does that very thing. If others, he says, have confidence, reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more.

I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I'm a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin, a real Hebrew if ever there was one. I was a member of the Pharisees who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law.

[1 : 17] I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church as for righteousness according to Jewish law, that is, I obeyed the law without fault.

And that's impressive. And he said nothing at all about his cosmopolitan education, nothing at all about his Roman citizenship.

What he did say, however, is most telling. Lumping all these things together in one mass, he said, I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done.

Yes, everything is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

For his sake, I have discarded everything else, counting it all as, and then he uses an expression, difficult to translate in polite society, reeking rubbish, steaming dung, something like that.

[2 : 37] In other words, what Paul is saying, that all my accomplishments, though in their own place and in their own circumstances, have a value, viewed in the light of who Jesus is and what he's done, they're worthless.

And viewed in the light of my faith in Jesus, and what flows from that, they're pointless. Jesus was the very center of Paul's life.

And if Jesus was the center of Paul's life, then the epicenter was the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross was Paul's focal point.

He tried to see everything through the cross. His own accomplishments, the world in which he lived, the claims of other people, the needs of those around him.

He sought to view them through the cross. Everything was seen through the lens of Jesus' death.

[3 : 40] And that's very appropriate, because amazingly, the cross is also God's focal point as he relates to us.

He sees us. Those who have a real, living faith in Jesus, he sees his people, he sees his children, he sees Christians through the cross of Jesus Christ.

And the result of this is that certain things within us are magnified in God's sight. And other things are diminished to the point where they vanish.

He doesn't see our guilt, for example. He doesn't see our weakness. He doesn't see our shortcomings. Well, that's not to say he doesn't know about them.

Of course he knows about them. He knows about everything. But he chooses not to see those things. He filters them out as he looks at us through the cross of Jesus Christ. And he sees all his people as perfect as Jesus himself is.

[4 : 56] Now, I guess that's not how we see ourselves. And I'm pretty confident it's not how we see one another. But that's how God sees us.

And that is a very remarkable reality. He sees us as if we were Jesus. Jesus taking our place upon the cross, being our substitute.

And he is who looms large when God looks at us. Great 18th century hymn writer Augustus Montague, top lady, put it very remarkably and very well.

He said, the terrors of law and of God with me can have nothing to do. My Savior's obedience and blood hide all my transgressions from view.

So, this evening, as we turn our eyes from all that would distract us, we focus on the cross. And particularly, as it's portrayed here in Mark chapter 15.

[6 : 05] And we need to ask the question as we look at it in the light of Mark's writing, his description. Did you notice how terse it is, how economical his language is?

He doesn't go into great details. And yet, he builds up to this crescendo that is very, very deeply moving. And we see a number of important things that he draws to our attention.

And the first thing I would like us to notice is that in the cross, we see inescapably the agony of Jesus.

We see the agony of Jesus. Verse 23, for example. They offered him wine mingled with myrrh, but he didn't take it.

Well, what's all that about? Well, wine mingled with myrrh was the best that anyone could come up with at the time by way of an analgesic, a painkiller.

[7 : 12] It wasn't going to dull the pain of crucifixion very much and not for very long. But it's all that was available. We've got here the forsaken gift, the rejected gift.

If we go back to Bethlehem, we remember the three gifts. There's gold. That must have come in very handy for a family fleeing from Jerusalem, the Jerusalem area, and Herod and his vendetta against his child down to Egypt.

You can imagine the gold didn't last that very long. It was used. Doubtless the myrrh had a purpose. And surely the original myrrh had a function too.

But in the light of what we read here, we could think of the myrrh as the rejected gift. Here's the time when Jesus really needs it to dull the pain of crucifixion.

And he's offered it. And he says, no, thank you very much. They offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.

[8 : 29] Jesus was no stranger to suffering. As a man, he knew hunger and thirst and homelessness and weariness.

And before he gets to the cross, he's been scourged. Roman scourging was the most brutal punishment that was inflicted on the person.

It could easily end in death. He has this crown of thorns jammed on his head. And when you think of a crown of thorns, don't think of the kind of thorns that grow in a Scottish hedgerow.

It's nothing like that. These are the thorns of an acacia tree. And when we were in South Africa, we knew those thorns used as nails. They're very strong, very long, very sharp.

And this was jammed on his head by brutal soldiers. And then finally, the cross. The cross was execution scientifically devised.

[9 : 38] And the whole idea behind it was to inflict maximum pain for as long as possible. It was hard to die from crucifixion, but you did eventually.

Sometimes people hung on the cross for days in a lingering agony. It's the way that the Roman state had of showing its contempt for those who were the victims of crucifixion.

And Jesus, the sinless son of God, who went about doing good, is crucified. One of the great theologians of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, strikingly reminds us that on the cross, each one of Christ's five senses was fiercely assaulted.

Through his sense of touch, he felt the agony of the scourging and the nailing to the cross. His mouth tasted the bitterness of death and the bitterness of vinegar.

His nose detected that reek of death in the place called the place of the skull. His eyes were assailed by the grief of his own mother and the tears of the only disciple who remained faithful to him at the cross, the disciple he loved, and the crowd before him over whom he had already wept.

[11 : 04] Now, we have to ask ourselves the question, why is it that Scripture portrays, really by implication, rather than explicitly, but it's there nevertheless, the physical suffering of Jesus?

In our conservative Presbyterian tradition, we tend not to think that much about the physical suffering of Jesus, we think far more about his spiritual suffering.

So, why is it that Scripture does portray so clearly the physical suffering of Jesus? And surely, part of the answer, at any rate, is to be found in Romans 6 and verse 13, where Paul writes to the Christian church in Rome.

He's never met these people. He knows of their existence. And he's writing a sort of very general letter in which he wants to encourage and help them and anyone else who would read it. And he says this, he says, do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God. Don't let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin.

[12 : 28] He writes that because he knows that's what people do. That's how sin is given expression. That's how it bursts through the limits of our minds out there into the world.

It's through our bodies, through the lips that speak, through the eyes that see, through the hands that do, through the feet that go. Our hands, our legs, our mouths become the instruments through which we violate God's law.

And that is why Jesus, our substitute, bears physical punishment. The physical punishment that our disobedient and rebellious bodies deserves.

Peter, his first letter, chapter 2, verse 24, makes the point.

He himself bore our sins on the cross. No, that's not what he says. He says, he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross.

[13 : 43] They offered him wine mingled with myrrh, but he didn't take it.

Because our sins are expressed physically, he must suffer physically. And so he refused the analgesic.

He refused the painkiller. He refused the painkiller. So in the cross we see the agony of Jesus. And then next, in the next verse, verse 24, in the cross we see the degradation of Jesus. They crucified him.

Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. what's the implication of that?

[14 : 45] Not the kind of thing you really want to talk about in church on a Sunday evening. But it's an inescapable fact. He was crucified naked. That's the fact of the matter.

There's a hint of that, of course, in the 22nd Psalm, where that suffering individual says that he can count all his bones. They took his clothes away.

They cast lots to see what each would get. He was degraded for us. Thomas Kelly's father was a judge in the Irish courts and in his family's mind Thomas was destined for the bar.

But he was converted and he became a minister in the Church of Ireland. But the Bishop of Dublin so disliked his strong evangelical preaching that he degraded Thomas Kelly.

Effectively revoked his preaching license. Wouldn't allow him to preach in any consecrated building. And Kelly's own experience of this degradation not only made him acutely sensitive to the rights of others and their possible degradation but he became even more acutely aware of the honours of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[16 : 16] The Son of God who as of right occupies the place of highest privilege beside his father. And this comes out wonderfully in Thomas Kelly's crucifixion hymn.

The head that once was crowned with thorns. The first two lines of the second verse go like this. The highest place that heaven affords is his by sovereign right.

As God the Son Jesus was worshipped and he was served by the angels. But we read that temporarily he laid this glory aside.

He came down from heaven. Again in Philippians chapter 2 Paul charts that staircase down which Jesus descends descending ever lower and ever deeper.

He descends into humanity, into servanthood, into suffering, into death, even death on a cross. earth. And the apostles' creed, a great statement of the church, which is part of our own creedal heritage here in the free church, takes Jesus down another step because that's what the rest of scripture teaches.

[17 : 40] It tells us that he descended into hell. You can't go lower than that. you're in the abyss.

And that descent into degradation is symbolized by this shocking fact that he died naked. All that covered the body of Jesus was the blood streaming from his head and his hands.

And what was on the cross was a shocking and a disgusting sight. It was a fearful spectacle. At the cross, Jesus becomes an object of total shame, total disgrace.

He takes upon himself the vileness of the guilt of our sins. And as a consequence, he becomes vile and wretched and horrible and repulsive.

[19 : 00] Can you imagine a mom and a dad making their way to Jerusalem that day with their children and dad looks on her head and he sees what's happening? We'll find another way into the city. We're not going there.

Jesus is being identified at this point with our sin. This is what's degrading him.

Not the action of the Roman soldiers. That's only the symbol of his degradation. The reality is that our guilt has been placed on him.

Paul puts it like this. He was made to be sin for us. What does that mean? It doesn't mean to say that Jesus sinned.

It means that he becomes the very embodiment of sin. He becomes in the sight of God revolting and gross.

[20 : 02] So what happens? God averts his gaze and he withdraws his presence. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

This is the point at which Jesus descends into hell. It's not that he died. I think the Apostles Creed has got the order wrong and the reformers have always said that. It's not that he dies and then descends into hell.

The descent into hell is the descent into death. It's one and the same thing. And he suffers in shame so that you and I might be lifted up to glory.

He suffers in nakedness so we might wear the splendid seamless spotless robe of his righteousness.

He was degraded so that we could be upgraded. So that we might stand boldly and with confidence as we're thinking this morning in God's presence without embarrassment, without shame, without humiliation, without self-consciousness.

[21 : 33] Bearing shame and scoffing rude in my place, condemned he stood, says the old hymn, sealed my pardon with his blood.

And the response, hallelujah. What a savior. And then finally we see the suffering of Jesus in his alienation.

Verses 34 and 37. Already touched on 34, we'll come back to that nevertheless. And on the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama, sabachthani.

Which means, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And then verse 37, with a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

Not only does sin render us guilty before God's law, not only does it defile us, not only does it degrade us, but it also alienates us from God.

[22 : 56] It cuts us off from him. Because of our rebellion and our guilt, we forfeit all claim to his favor. We know God's word teaches us without a shadow of doubt, God hates sin.

And he hates it with a constant, unwavering, holy hatred. And you know, it's only a half truth. It's only a half truth to say that God hates sin, but he loves the sinner.

It's only a half truth. The full truth is that God hates sin and he punishes the sinner. God is an inescapable fact of scripture.

God is just and he's holy. He can't bend the rules and make exceptions and do favors. He can't turn a blind eye.

And judged by his perfect standard, every single one of us, and I don't mean every single one of us in this building tonight, I mean every single one of us in the human race, we're undeniably guilty.

[24 : 22] Guilty as charged. And we may want to offer our excuses, but there's no excuse. We may want to plead extenuating circumstances, it wasn't really my fault.

That was a ploy from the beginning. When Adam turned around, it wasn't my fault, it was the woman she got that fruit and she thought it was a good idea. But we can't plead any extenuating circumstances at all.

Our record speaks for itself. We've rejected God, we've lived as outlaws, we've disobeyed his commandments, we've been rebels.

Against God. And in consequence, we find ourselves on death row. What's our hope?

Perhaps in the most wild and fantastic wish, we might long for someone to come and take our place and take our punishment and be our substitute and bear the consequences in our own place and let us go.

[25 : 36] But who could realistically expect such a thing to happen? And yet that is precisely what happens. Jesus takes our guilt upon himself.

And instead of us being alienated from God, he himself is alienated from God. God turns from him. God forsakes him, we read. He dies in our place. Now down through the centuries, Christian thinkers have tried to draw some significance and meaning out of this.

Of course, it is a most profound idea. And they've drawn the wrong conclusion sometimes. The purpose of Jesus' death is not to teach us how to uncomplainingly bear injustice against us, though it does do that, nor is it primarily designed to extend some moral influence over us, inspiring us to live better lives, though it does that too.

The central reality is this, that in dying for us, Jesus is our substitute. He takes our place.

[27 : 03] He bears on himself the full force of the anger of God which we deserve. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And the answer is that you, Jesus, have become sin and you, Jesus, have willingly become the substitute of your people. That's why.

some of you may have heard of the great 19th century free church father called John Duncan, an Abedonian.

He became the first professor of Hebrew in New College, which was then a free church college in Edinburgh. And there's a story, a true story. And Duncan was lecturing his students, he got off the subject.

He often did that. He wasn't a good teacher of elementary Hebrew. He was far too clever. His mind went off in all sorts of directions and he was far too undisciplined. And on this occasion, whatever it was he was supposed to have been teaching his students, his mind wandered far and far away from that and he found himself thinking of the cross.

[28 : 16] and he sat down. There was a chair rather like this one I guess on the podium where he was lecturing his students and he sank into the chair, both arms over the edge, his arms over the edge of the arms of the chair and the tears were coursing down his face and his students heard him say in a low voice, it was damnation and he took it lovingly.

And that's what it was. He was alienated for us. It was damnation and he took it lovingly and his father forsakes him but his father never loved him more than when he was accomplishing our redemption.

And this terrible task, Jesus completed, finishing what he came to do, which is the significance of verse 37.

Mark doesn't tell us the full picture or the full sound and the words that were uttered or the word that was uttered, but we read with a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

And the other gospel writers tell us that the loud cry was a single word, finished. And be thankful for the grammar of the New Testament, because if that had been said in English, we would then be puzzling who were finished.

[30 : 13] Was he saying, I'm finished? Was he looking out at those who were opposed to him, aware that his resurrection was coming, and saying, you're finished?

finished. But it was none of those things. He said, it is finished. He wasn't finished, and because of his grace, nor are those who have been his enemies, they can become his friends.

But the work that he came to do, the redemptive part of the work that he came to do, was completed in his death. It's sealed in his resurrection.

The work has been done. And that has got a very simple but a very, very profound truth for us. Do you want to be right with God?

There is nothing you can do to get right with God. Jesus has done it all.

[31 : 26] And he offers you that renewed status, that renewed and upgraded status of sonship, daughtership of God, and you accept that by faith.

You don't get it by your good works, you don't get it by the seriousness of your intentions. sins. You take it simply by faith that Jesus has done it all.

That old children's hymn has got impeccable theology. He died that we might be forgiven.

He died to make us good, that we might go at last to heaven, saved by his precious blood.

Well, it's little wonder, isn't it, the poor glory in the cross. Little wonder that he not only sang the praises of Jesus, but his whole life was a peon of praise to Jesus.

[32 : 33] And as we gather here this evening, don't we feel that conflict of emotions, that combination of profound sadness that it was our sin that took him to the cross, and yet deep joy and profound gratitude that we can say, I hope we can all say, what the apostle Paul said, the son of God loved me and gave himself for me.

It's a truth to be able to say that Jesus died for sinners. It's a wonderful truth. It's a wonderful truth to say that Jesus died for his own people. But both those statements, whilst they have value in particular contexts, they really miss the point.

The real point is to be able to say, he loved me. And he gave himself to me. So, don't come with Jesus seeking to win his favour by the good that you think you do, or the seriousness of your intent. Come with what you have, nothing, an empty hand, God. And take what he offers, everything, all bundled up, and we don't have time even to touch it this evening, all bundled up in that word salvation.

He offers it to you freely. And if you've never taken it, then take it tonight. Receive Jesus Christ as he has offered to you in the gospel.

[34 : 27] And it does us all good as Christians as well, as it were, to take him afresh, to take him anew this evening.

If we'd had communion this evening, we would have been celebrating in a very visual way that on the cross, Jesus took from our hand the cup of condemnation and he drained it to the bitter dregs. And now he puts into our hands a cup brim full with salvation. And we feel profound gratitude for that.

And the obvious question was raised in the hymn that we sang before we looked at this part of God's word together. Isaac Watts says, were the whole realm of nature mine that were an offering far too small.

Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. And we wonder, what can I give to Jesus in response to what he's given to me?

[35 : 41] Well, Isaac Watts is helpful, but far more helpful is the word of God. And the psalmist who says, in the words of the old King James, and I still think that resonates, what shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?

And what's the answer? Not what I give, not what I offer, I will take, I will take the cup of salvation. Our response to God is always a response of taking, with nothing to give, with everything to receive, to take from him all that he's got for us, and to live in the good of it, in the joy of it, and that's praise to him.

Well, may he bless his word to us this evening. I think it would be appropriate for and he would un to him.