

As we close our series in Mark's gospel, in chapter 15 Mark tells of Jesus' rejection, crucifixion and death. Yet, on a deeper level, Mark's story also reveals the very heart of human nature. It proves that man, in his natural state, is capable of intense hatred and evil. That man, in his natural state, is God's enemy. The story is a mirror for the human heart, fully revealing its character and condition. When we look at Jesus and what the people did to him that day, we can see ourselves. We either see that we are walking with our faith in Jesus. Or, guilty of rejecting the King. The religious leaders have no place for Jesus Christ. They thought they were justified in all their actions. They believed that they were right with God. The fact is that they do not accept God on the basis of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. They outrightly rejected the one who is truly King. The encounter between Jesus and Pilate came down to Pilate turning his back on Truth. Pilate was more concerned with keeping the Jews happy than he was in protecting an innocent man.

Here, at his death, Jesus was named as the Son of God. He always had been the Son of God, but on that day, someone spoke it out loud. Here, on the darkest day of human history, the love of God shines forth in Christ's self-sacrifice. Here, at the depths of human sinfulness and iniquity, God extended forgiveness to us all. Here, under the crush of all that was twisted, perverted, and gone wrong, the Son of God suffered and died at our hands that we might live and be made new by his hands. Here, Jesus accepted humiliation and the loneliness of being forsaken by God in order to bring us glory, honour, and fellowship with God, himself, and each other.

What was the worst part of his suffering? His loneliness. Jesus was accused and condemned by the religious leaders. He was rejected by his own people. He was betrayed and deserted by his disciples. He was convicted by the government authorities. He was mocked, stripped, struck, beaten, and spit upon by the soldiers. He was derided by the passers-by. He was mocked by the chief priests and the scribes. He was insulted by the robbers who were crucified with him. And then, Jesus, who had lived with the awareness of the presence of God, took on the sin of the world, stood before God as one cursed and condemned on our account, and realized the full weight of God's judgment. He suffered the anguish of being separated from God, so he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And here is where Christ won the victory! One time in human history, the powers of sin, death, hate, and evil were defeated. Jesus took on the worst they could do, but they did not break him. Jesus never returned evil for evil. Jesus never cursed those who condemned and executed him. Christ remained sinless and obedient unto God, even while his obedience meant that he would die. The force of death is felt in its ability to make us fear death, but Christ faced it without fear. Those who passed by ridiculed him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' So also, the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, 'he saved others, he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' They demanded the impossible, but they spoke truth they did not realize. Jesus could not save himself, for in saving himself, we would have been lost. Only by losing himself could Jesus be himself, the Christ, the Son of God, and so save us.

In his rejection we find our acceptance, in his death we find our new life, in his loneliness we find our communion. In the face of the willing, lonely death of Jesus, the centurion spoke the truth: "Truly this man was God's Son!" Jesus suffered the loneliness of being forsaken by God so that we will not have to. None of us ever have to be as lonely as he was. No matter how alone we are, God and his Christ are always with us. And because they are with us, they provide the basis for us to be together with each other. Jesus realized that it was more important to obey God than to save his own life. How wonderful this is! Jesus realized that it was more important to obey God than to go along with the crowd. The crucifixion teaches us that we no longer have to cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Christ has done that already. We can live and we can die in the confidence of God's presence.

In Chapter 16, Mark tells us of the dawn of a new day. Mark brings us in the early hours on the first day of the week to the tomb where Jesus was buried. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices to anoint the body of Jesus. On their way, the women discussed the difficulty of removing the stone covering the entrance of the tomb. When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. Entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were amazed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.

The witness of the empty tomb is a message to be proclaimed: "But go, tell". The two verbs convey action and immediacy to carry out the instruction. Jesus is already going on ahead of them to the place of his early ministry in Galilee: "there you will see him, just as he told you". During the Passover meal, in chapter 14, Jesus did tell his disciples, "But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee". The crucified and risen Lord comes among his followers as the shepherd who goes before the sheep. How wonderful!

Mark tells us of the women fleeing from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. And fear was an appropriate thing for these women to feel. For not only did something totally unexpected take place, but this particular unexpected thing was fiercely cosmic. It shattered reality. It changed everything, and the women who were the first to ponder that mind-boggling fact were right to feel a little afraid. It was the reaction to be rightly expected. The women, really did not know what to say or do. They were in awe of God's presence among them and the risen Lord who goes before them. Jesus' resurrection proves that Jesus is faithful to his promise. Mark here, emphasises that Jesus is always a step ahead of us. Always waiting for us in Galilee. Always holding us together. Always guiding us back to himself and to our first calling and that is to follow him.

A dying world was in need of the renewing grace and power which only the resurrected Jesus could give. This was a task that could not wait. Jesus could not and would not hang out at a tomb. He had to go on up ahead of them, demanding that if they wanted to see him, they'd have to get moving, too. And so, must we.

May God's grace and power enable us all to continue to follow our Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

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