



Lesson 8: The Crucifixion of Christ

Lesson Introduction:

Though Jesus had prepared his followers (and the Gospel writers had prepared their readers) for the crucifixion, it proved to be (then and now) a shocking event. Even for modern readers who know story well, it is startling to read again the accounts of Jesus' suffering, crucifixion, and death. Even though we know that Sunday's resurrection is coming, the significance and horror of Jesus' death is not diminished. It does (and must) impact us as we simultaneously feel grateful, sorrowful, and disturbed all at once. As we study the passion of Christ in this lesson, I pray that we will grasp a bit more of the significance of the event and come away with even greater appreciation for the work of our Savior in offering redemption.

Read the Text: Mark 15:6-39

Understanding the Text:

The Context of Crucifixion

The crucifixion was not a surprise to Jesus. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus foretold of his own crucifixion as early as Mark 8. In Mark 8, Jesus is in the region of Caesarea Philippi in the far north of Israel. In fact, this was most likely the farthest Jesus ever traveled from Jerusalem in terms of physical distance. Yet in this region so far removed from the horrors that awaited him in Jerusalem, Jesus brings attention to the cross: "If anyone would follow after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34). In John's Gospel, Jesus seems to be referring to his crucifixion as early as John 3:14-15: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Here, Jesus is reminding Nicodemus of the story from Numbers 21 where the people of God rebelled and God sent poisonous snakes into the camp to bite and kill the people. When the people prayed and repented, God instructed Moses to fashion a snake of bronze and lift it up on a pole. Snakes were ugly and harmful in the eyes of the Israelites but God used it as a means of healing and salvation. Now Jesus is saying that he will be lifted up on a pole as the bronze snake in the desert so that all who look to him in faith believing will be saved. The cross, like the snake, was ugly and harmful but used by God to bring salvation.

Jesus speaks of the cross until they finally reach Jerusalem. After praying in the Garden of Gethsemane through the night, Jesus is betrayed to the Jewish authorities by Judas. While the Pharisees and the Priests often opposed one another (see Acts 23:6-8 as an example), they seemed to be united in their hatred of Jesus. They want to destroy him. The Pharisees are angry because Jesus challenged their traditions and teaching of the law. The Priests are angry because Jesus has condemned their leadership in the temple. Together, they take him to Pilate and accuse Jesus of something they know will force the hand of the Roman governor, rebelling against Rome and pretending to be a king. The Romans were keen to put down any rebellions and opposition with swift and harsh responses. By portraying Jesus as an enemy of Rome, they ensure that Pilate will kill him. Though Pilate is reluctant, he agrees and sends Jesus out to be beaten, humiliated, and crucified.

It is quite remarkable to me that the Gospel writers do not describe the crucifixion in much detail. In fact, the Gospel writers use more words to describe how the soldiers divided up Jesus' clothes than they do describing how they nailed him to the cross. Consider below how the writers quickly report the crucifixion:

- Matthew 27:35a – When they had crucified him . . .
- Mark 15:24a – And they crucified him.
- Luke 23:33b – . . . there they crucified him . . .
- John 19:23a – When the soldiers crucified Jesus . . .

None of these passages describe how the actual crucifixion was carried out. The only time nails are mentioned is in John 20:25 when Thomas asked to see the holes that the nails made in Jesus' hands.ⁱ If you want to know more about how the actual act of crucifixions took place you must look outside of the Bible because the Bible simply doesn't describe it.

This may seem strange to us until we consider that the original audiences of the Gospels did not need an explanation of crucifixion. It was a common practice in their day and many had even seen a crucified person hanging on the tree or even an act of crucifixion being carried out. Crucifixion had been a practice of Israel's enemies for centuries and many Jews had been nailed to crosses before Jesus. The Assyrians who overcame northern Israel used crucifixion as a method of terrorizing local populations. The Persians also crucified as a means of frightening communities. The Greeks used crucifixion when they occupied Israel. Likewise, the Romans preferred the method of crucifixion as a way to deterring people from breaking Roman law. The historical records reveal many instances of mass crucifixion among the Jews including:ⁱⁱ

- Alexander the Great who crucified Jews and other residents of Palestine in his conquest and push towards Egypt in the 300s BC.
- 170 years before Jesus was born, Antiochus IV, the Greek ruler of Israel crucified many Jews who opposed him in and around Jerusalem.
- When Jesus was a child (possibly 6-8 years old) the Jews rebelled against Rome but the Roman governor, Varrus, put down the rebellion and crucified 2,000 Jews along major roads.

The Gospel writers did not need to explain the process of crucifixion because their audiences knew it well.

The Romans used crucifixion throughout their Empire so wherever the Gospel reached, crucifixion was known. Any non-citizen of Rome could be crucified for treason, sedition, rebellion, and threatening Roman rule and order. Crucifixion was not the most efficient way to execute people as death could take days. For Romans, however, execution was not the ultimate reason for using crucifixion. The gruesome display was just as much about deterring others as it was about killing the condemned. The public horror of crucifixion warned all who saw the scene not to do what the man on the cross had done. That is why signs were affixed to the crosses describing the crime or wrong act of the crucified. Crucifixion was designed to prevent similar behavior in the future through fear. John Dennis reports, "The main reason for the use of crucifixion as a punishment was its deterrent value . . . This is why the ancients placed crosses along well-traveled highways, on hilltops and at city gates."ⁱⁱⁱ It was only the Passover holiday that caused the crucifixion of Jesus and the two with him to be cut short. In most circumstances, "victims would remain alive for days"^{iv} and even be able to talk with people as they passed by before they eventually died of blood loss or asphyxiation. Sometimes birds of prey would begin eating the flesh of the crucified while they were still alive. The word "crucifixion" comes from Latin meaning "attach to a cross." Even Roman historians described it as "a horribly violent, sadistic, and cruel affair" and "the most cruel and disgusting penalty in which victims died in pain and agony and suffered the worst extreme of the tortures inflicted on slaves."^v

All of this and more was known to the disciples when Jesus asked them to pick up the cross in Mark 8. This was known to Nicodemus when Jesus told him that he would be lifted up in John 3. Those following Jesus knew what it meant to be crucified. It was also well known to the Pharisees and Sadducees when they shouted "crucify him!" Jesus himself knew what it meant and willingly embraced this as a key part of his mission on Earth.

The Temptation to Avoid Crucifixion

From the beginning of Jesus' ministry Jesus was moving to the cross even as Satan was tempting him to do otherwise. We sometimes imagine Satan celebrating as Jesus suffers and dies on the cross but

his sacrificial death was actually what Satan wanted to prevent. The first recorded incident of temptation happens after Jesus' baptism (Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13). In each of the three temptations, Jesus was ultimately tempted to act selfishly. Satan's first temptation of man in the Garden was to act selfishly and oppose the plan of God. Satan's temptations of Jesus were the same. If Satan could prompt Jesus to commit even the slightest act of selfishness before his death, Christ's mission on Earth would be ruined. So at one point Satan takes Jesus up on a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. Satan knows that Jesus has come to bring the kingdoms of man into the Kingdom of God. He offers Jesus a way to have the kingdoms without suffering and dying on the cross: "All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me" Matthew 4:9. It would never be tempting for Jesus to worship Satan but it would indeed be tempting to have the prize of the nations without the pain and suffering of the cross. Jesus withstood the temptation knowing that Satan's kingdoms are temporary but God's Kingdom is eternal.

The temptation of Jesus did not end on the high mountain. As Jesus was explaining his future death to the disciples in Mark 8 Peter rebuked Jesus for speaking this way. Peter did not anticipate the Messiah dying in Jerusalem on a cross and he wanted to prevent Jesus from doing so. Jesus heard the words of Satan in Peter's voice and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan" (Mark 8:33). Satan also used another disciple to discourage Jesus from the cross. Luke 22:3 and John 13:27 report that Satan influenced Judas to betray Jesus. This betrayal was less about pushing Jesus towards the cross and more about discouraging Jesus from the cross. The Pharisees and Priests did not necessarily need an insider to arrest Jesus. Though Judas helped them, they could have captured Jesus alone. I believe in this betrayal we see the plan of Satan to discourage Jesus from following the plan of God. Satan was showing Jesus that his own disciples for whom he would soon die were betrayers (like Judas), deniers (like Peter), and deserters who were wholly unworthy of his great sacrifice. Jesus was well aware of this but the sting of betrayal from one so close to him must have been painful for Jesus. Yet he was not deterred or tempted away from the cross. Historically, Israel had often betrayed God and worshipped idols. Jesus was experiencing a that old habit in Judas and even Peter.

Satan tempted Jesus to reject the cross even after he was crucified. While Jesus was hanging on the cross he was being tempted to come down. This time the temptation of Satan was given voice by the religious leaders who lined up to mock Jesus on the cross. Some said, "Let this Christ . . . come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe" (Mark 15:32). This may have been the most tempting temptation – to show power to those mocking him or to show ability for those refusing to believe. Jesus was powerful and Jesus was able to come down. Yet the ultimate display of his power and his ability would not be seen in coming off the cross but by remaining on the cross until his death so that the sacrificial death would be complete. Christ would rather be known as the one who died for others than the one who saved himself. Jesus didn't come down so that he could show himself to a few. He remained on the cross so that he could provide redemption for the many.

Jesus was determined to fulfill the plan of God and Satan's persistent and immense temptation never deterred him. Even though we see his agonizing prayer in the garden, "Take this cup from me" he continues on, "Yet not what I will but what you will" (Mark 14:36). Jesus felt the weight and the pull of the temptation but he determined to do the will of God. Jesus fulfilled his mission not by merely avoiding the slightest act of selfishness but by committing the greatest act of selflessness at his death on the cross. Good Friday was not a good day for Satan. He did not celebrate the death of Jesus. Rather, Satan realized his defeat and Christ's victory on Good Friday. Satan failed to turn Jesus even the slightest bit away from the plan of God and the suffering of the cross.

The Results of Christ's Crucifixion

Much of the New Testament is devoted to describing the results of the sacrificial death of Jesus. Most notably, the letters to the Romans and the Hebrews powerfully describes the results of the death and resurrection of Christ for humanity. Mark's concern, along with the other Gospel writers, is describing more of the teaching and events of Jesus than the theology even though theology is certainly found in the Gospels. When we read the Gospels in conjunction with the letters (and indeed the Old Testament as well) we see the whole picture.

It is very interesting that Mark only departs from the crucifixion scene once in his narrative and he does this for the purpose of showing his readers a glimpse of the results of Christ's work on the cross. In

Mark 15:38, Mark leaves Golgotha for a brief moment and carries his readers into the Temple. He reports that a curtain there had been torn in two from top to bottom when Jesus died.

Since the days of the traveling tabernacle and throughout the history of Israel, two primary curtains hung in the house of God; one separated the Holy Place from the courtyard and was visible to many while the other separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place (or the Holy of Holies) and was only visible to the priests. Sometimes these curtains were called the outer veil and the inner veil respectively. The Jewish historian Josephus described the outer veil (the one visible to many) as “a magnificent tapestry eighty feet tall.”^{vi} While we cannot be certain which curtain Mark references, we can be sure that this was a dramatic event in the Temple. The tear was from top to bottom indicating that it was not the work of man but of God.

While some view this as an act of judgement by God against the Temple (and this may very well be part of God’s intention), we also need to consider the ripped curtain in view of the purpose of the curtains. The curtains were commanded by God and established to mark and sustain separation. The sin of the people prevented the masses from drawing near to God. Thus, in the Old Covenant, the closer we come to the actual presence of God in the Most Holy Place, the more limited the access. Anyone could stand around the outer courts but only Jews could enter the courtyard. From the courtyard, only priests could enter the Holy Place. Only the high priest, once a year, could enter the Most Holy Place. Access to the presence of God was limited on account of sin and the curtains were physical representations of this spiritual reality. Thus, when the curtain was ripped open by God it was not only an act of judgment against the Temple but also an act of reconciliation made possible by the atoning work of Jesus with his sacrificial death on the cross. The open curtain represents a change in the way God interacts with humanity. As the writer of Hebrews states, we can now “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence” (Hebrews 4:16). We were previously unable because of sin but now we are invited in because of the gracious work of Jesus. Hebrews 10:19-22 goes on to affirm that we have access even to the Most Holy Place through the blood of Jesus:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

Paul affirms this in Romans 5:2 when he writes that through Jesus “we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.” Darkness covered the earth when Jesus died but simultaneously a curtain opened up in the Temple so that those who previously had no access can enter into the presence and glory of God by way of faith in Jesus.

Not only did we gain access but also the opening of the curtain symbolizes that the presence of God is no longer confined behind a curtain in a room in Jerusalem. The Greek word used by Mark to describe the tearing of the curtain is *σχίζω* (shizo, from which we draw the English word schism). The only other time Mark uses this verb *σχίζω* is when he describes the events following the baptism of Jesus in Mark 1:10: “As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open (*σχίζω*) and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.” Before the curtain was torn open at Jesus’ death, the sky was torn open at Jesus’ baptism as the Holy Spirit moved between heaven and earth. The divine tearing in both places, I believe, represents a new (or restored) type of interaction between God and mankind without the separation brought about by sin. The Holy Spirit passes through a torn sky to rest upon Jesus and the same Spirit may have passed through a torn curtain in preparation for his interaction with all humanity. For soon after the death of Jesus, (50 days after Passover actually) during the harvest festival of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down not to dwell in a room or behind a curtain but to rest and remain on people of faith from both inside and outside Jerusalem. By the work of Jesus we too can live continually in the presence of God by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in each of us. The Temple is no longer the only place to find the presence of God on earth. Now we can find God in and through his people.

Apply the Text:

As mentioned above, Romans 5 gives an excellent summary the results of the crucifixion of Christ. First, Paul mentions that now humanity can have peace with God. Sin had made us the enemies of God and no amount of animal's blood spilled in tabernacles and temples could atone for our transgression. Atonement means to make right again or to satisfy. The word was part of the vocabulary of the Greek legal system. A judge could order some action on the part of the offender toward the offended to make atonement. In the cast of humanity versus God, no action on our part could satisfy the righteous demands of God. Only God himself, through Jesus the Son, could make things right again between God and mankind. Jesus did this on the cross and now we can have reconciliation with God through faith in Jesus. It is necessary for us to remember without the sacrifice of Christ we are God's enemies but through Jesus we become God's children.

Second, Paul says that we have access to God by the blood of Jesus. This was discussed in detail above but it is important for us to remember that we can and should live in the presence of God continually. God is not only present in powerful church services or special events. God's presence is always with us through the Holy Spirit living in us. We are now the temple of God.

Third, we have hope in God according to Romans 5. This hope not only draws our attention to future glory but also assists us in present suffering. Salvation is not the end of trouble but it is the beginning of living hope in the midst of trials as Peter describe in 1 Peter 1. As we look to Christ we see a man who truly suffered but also truly preserved into the glory God had reserved for him. God also a glorious future for us which we can truly hope to receive. Yet this sure hope in God's glory give us real help in times of trouble. Salvation is not about just getting into heaven. Salvation is about relationship with God even in the difficult times of life. Really, the only reason we look forward to heave is because God is there. But God is also here with us and we can have hope in Him.

Conclusion:

As we conclude this brief study, let us consider once more the words of Paul in Romans 5:6-10 as we consider the significance of Christ's death on the cross for both the world in general and us in particular.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

ⁱ The actual act of nailing Jesus to the cross is mentioned in Acts 2:23 and Colossians 2:14.

ⁱⁱ John A Dennis, Death of Jesus from *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 173-174.

ⁱⁱⁱ John A Dennis, Death of Jesus from *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 173.

^{iv} John A Dennis, Death of Jesus from *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 174.

^v John A Dennis, Death of Jesus from *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 173.

^{vi} Robert H. Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 717.