

THE AWFUL PENALTY

by Ray C. Stedman

Mark 15 brings us to the account of the crucifixion. Because of the sacredness of this incident, let's pause for a moment and pray together before we look into this passage.

Prayer:

Our Father, we ask that your Holy Spirit may take the scene that we look at this morning and imprint it deeply upon our hearts and minds, and that we may understand something of the marvelous implications of it. We know that we are not looking at a mere martyrdom of a man of high ideals, but we are looking at the payment of a ransom for sin. We pray that we may understand it and that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened that we may grasp this truth as it pertains to each of us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Mark's account of this crucifixion is somewhat different from the other gospel writers'. Mark leaves out a great many things that the others have included. For instance, Mark includes only one sentence spoken by Jesus, the seven words that he spoke from the cross. In fact, the actual description of Jesus' actions and words that Mark records are limited to three very short passages in this account. You will find the first of these in Verse 22:

**And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull).
{Mark 15:22 RSV}**

Many of you who have been in Jerusalem know that right outside the Damascus gate in the northern wall of the city is a little mound that looks like a skull, and many feel that this is the place where Jesus was crucified. It looks like a skull, and therefore, it was called in Hebrew "Golgotha," which means skull. Then Mark says,

**And they offered him wine mingled with myrrh; but he did not take it. {Mark 15:23
RSV}**

This is man's feeble attempt to allay the pain and the suffering of the cross, "but he did not take it". Then Mark says, in just four short words, "there they crucified him."

The gospel writers have a tremendous reserve about describing the crucifixion. None of them describe the driving of the nails or the agony that Jesus must have exhibited at that time; it is simply put in these stark terms, "there they crucified him." Mark skips over almost all of the first three hours on the cross to the ninth hour, when Jesus cries out (Verse 33):

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, "Elo-i, Elo-i, lama sabach-thani?" which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" {Mark 15:33-34 RSV}

The third and final passage of description that Mark gives is in Verse 37:

And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from the top to bottom. {Mark 15:37-38 RSV}

The rest of the account in the gospel of Mark focuses on the people gathered around the cross. Mark's view is not the view of the crowd looking at Jesus, but rather the view from the cross itself, looking at the crowd. Gathered around the foot of the cross were a great number of individuals, or groups of individuals, who he brings before us so that we might see their reactions to the crucifixion of our Lord.

Mark clearly intended this to be a contrast between the inscrutable workings of God and the ways and the thinking of man. What he clearly is saying to us is that this event is timeless. If Jesus were crucified in Palo Alto today, these same people would be gathered around the cross; the cast of characters would remain unchanged. No matter what time or age the scene of Calvary was enacted for us, these same attitudes would always be displayed. I think that is the purpose of Mark's careful, deliberate descriptions of those who gathered around the cross.

The first of these character descriptions is found in Verse 21, where Mark describes an incident that occurred as Jesus was on his way to the cross. The Roman soldiers have been commissioned to take Jesus out to crucify him. On the way from Pilate's judgment seat, as they are going down the Via Dolorosa, the "way of sorrows", through the streets of Jerusalem, Jesus stumbles and falls. The second time he stumbles, the Roman soldiers grab a stranger who is in the crowd and impress him to bear the cross of Jesus. Verse 21 says,

And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. {Mark 15:21 RSV}

If you have any imagination at all, you can picture the feelings and attitudes of Simon when he was thus so rudely interrupted in what he had scheduled to do that day. He was from the country of Cyrene in North Africa and had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Feast. He was coming from his lodgings outside the city and had no idea that this strange event was about to take place. But, as he was watching Jesus stagger under the weight of the cross, Simon suddenly was grabbed by the soldiers and forced to carry the cross. There is little question that his feeling was one of anger at this interruption. Undoubtedly his attitude was one of unwilling involvement. Mark indicates that this is a common attitude of many today toward God and the things of God, and especially toward the cross.

There are many people today who are resentful that God should ever change their plans -- should ever interrupt what they have scheduled to happen. I have felt this way myself, and so have you. We resent it when some circumstance over which we have no control suddenly changes our plans, especially if it involves pain and suffering. This was the attitude of Simon of Cyrene as he bore the cross of Jesus.

There is much evidence in the Scripture that this event had a tremendous effect on Simon's life. There is a hint in the book of Acts that he was there on the Day of Pentecost and very likely did become a Christian as a result of this sudden interruption of his plans. Mark makes clear to us that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus, who are well-known to the Gentile believers to whom Mark is writing. If you turn to Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter 16, you will find that he mentions a Rufus with whom he was very closely associated and whose mother had been very kind to Paul. It is evidently the same Rufus. But here Mark simply brings out Simon's attitude of unwilling involvement in the crucifixion of Jesus.

Gathered around the foot of the cross were the soldiers who had crucified Jesus, those rough Roman soldiers who had crucified perhaps scores and scores of people. This was a time of great unrest and trouble in the land of Israel and there were others who were crucified about this time. Undoubtedly these soldiers had much experience in crucifixion, because when they had finished their work and Jesus was hanging from the cross, these callous soldiers got out a pair of dice and started a crap game at the foot of the cross. It seems strange to us that any man could contemplate the dying of Jesus and carry on in such a way. But here were men who were far more interested in making a buck than they were in the blood of Jesus. Mark indicates that in all times there are many people who are not at all concerned about the meaning of the death of Christ. Their whole concern is focused on making a fast buck. These soldiers stand forever as examples of those callous individuals who have no interest in the great story of the cross -- who shrug their shoulders with careless indifference to anybody who tries to call their attention to what was really happening at this scene. They just go back to their money-grubbing habits.

Also associated with the cross were the robbers who were crucified with Jesus (Verse 27),

And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. {Mark 15:27 RSV}

And later, in Verse 32, Mark adds:

Those who were crucified with him also reviled him. {Mark 15:32b RSV}

Here are two men who had been arrested in their campaign of terror and violence; they were professional revolutionaries. They were angry young men, committed to the philosophy of "get what you can any way that you can and it doesn't matter who is hurt in the process." These two looked upon Jesus as the same kind of man; they took out all their frustrations on him and reviled him because he could be of no more help to them than they could be to him.

Just this week I was reading of an interview with Lynette Fromme, the girl who took a shot at President Ford in Sacramento a few weeks ago and who has been a member of the Manson family. She told the interviewer that the thing that attracted her to Charles Manson was that, when he came to her, he said that his philosophy was "get what you want whenever you want it -- that is your God-inspired right." Now that is a widespread philosophy in our day and there is no question that if Jesus were crucified here in Palo Alto again, there would be representatives of this philosophy around who would mock him and revile him as these robbers did.

Mark doesn't tell us what happened to one of these men. Other gospel writers inform us that the other one was watching all that was happening and repented of his abuse of Jesus. He said, "We deserve to be here, but this man does not deserve this," {cf, Luke 23:41}. One of the most beautiful things about the story of the crucifixion is that just before Jesus breathed his last, this man, seeing all that had happened, suddenly realized, in a moment of truth, that Jesus was indeed a king entering a kingdom in which he had great power and authority. This one-time robber threw himself on the mercy of Jesus and cried out in a voice that has echoed through the centuries, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom," {cf, Luke 23:42}.

In Verse 29, Mark also tells us that there were certain passers-by who came by the cross as Jesus was suspended on it.

And those who passed by derided him, wagging 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!" {Mark 15:29-30 RSV}

These were just bystanders, but when they saw Jesus, they remembered that he was the one who had made these great claims, and they said, "Look, they've caught you, haven't they? You've gone too far. You were doing fine teaching the people, but then you began making these ridiculous claims that you could destroy the temple and raise it up again. You got what you had coming." Notice that Mark shows the derision by the little phrase, they went by "wagging their heads, and saying, 'Aha! They've got you!'" They heaped abuse on him.

There are many people today who feel that way; right here in Palo Alto there is a group of people who make a great deal over the teachings of Jesus. They advertise themselves as following him as the great moral leader and teacher. They are widely spreading the idea that the teachings of Jesus are designed to bless man. But whenever these people read in the Scriptures any claim by Jesus that he is anything more than human, whenever they see that he made any claims to the supernatural or said, "I am the Son of God", or "I am the only way to the Father", they can't accept it. They cannot buy that kind of a claim and they rip it out of their Bibles. Mark makes it clear that such a view of the person of Jesus is deadly wrong and stops short of an acknowledgment that would lead to the realization of what God wants them to see in him.

In Verses 31-32, Mark describes the priests who also were at 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 Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." {Mark 15:31-32a RSV}

These priests had been very frightened of Jesus before but were very arrogant now. Before, they were threatened by him. They saw that he was able to lead and teach the crowds and bless the crowds in ways that the priests had no power to do themselves. So they were jealous of him and angry at him, and they

accomplished his death. Their moment had come and they stood around the cross mocking him and gloating over his helplessness. They threw at him these words, "Come down from the cross and save yourself; you've saved others, but you can't save yourself. If you'll just come down from the cross, we'll see and believe." There are many religious leaders today who use the name of Christianity but say they can accept everything about Christianity except the cross. If Jesus would just abandon the cross, they could swallow the whole thing. They don't like the cross because of the gore and the blood. If you ever hear a gospel preached that doesn't have at its core the cross of Jesus Christ, then you are listening to what Paul called "another gospel," which is anathema to God. The cross is at the very heart of the good news of Jesus Christ.

There was another fellow at the cross who was interested in all the proceedings. His name is not given to us, he was just one of the bystanders. But he enters the picture when Jesus calls out to God, in Verses 35-36,

And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." And one ran and, filling a sponge full of vinegar, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." {Mark 15:35-36 RSV }

At first glance, it looks like this man is moved with compassion for Jesus. He runs to get vinegar, this anesthetic that will deaden the pain of suffering, and fills a sponge with it and puts it up to the lips of Jesus. It looks like he is trying to relieve his suffering and offering him some relief from his pain. But, if you look at Mark's account carefully, that is not his motive at all. His motive is to see if something exciting will happen. He is not moved by compassion, but by curiosity.

Sometimes you read in the papers about a man who has crawled out on a ledge over a city street and is about to commit suicide. A crowd gathers below to watch him. Perhaps he will sit there in indecision for moments, even hours; but the crowd, keeps waiting to see when he will jump. As he delays, they become impatient and some of them yell up at him, "Jump, what's the matter?" It is indicative of the thrill-seeking desires of people today who would have their own momentary passions met at the cost of a human life. This man at the cross is saying, "Let's delay this death." He gave Jesus the sponge so he would not die too quickly. "Wait," he said, "let's see whether Elijah will come and deliver him." I think perhaps of all those who gathered around the cross of Christ, there is no incident more characteristic of our own day than the cheap, thrill-seeking desire for pleasure that this man exhibits.

At this point, Jesus dies. He calls out with a loud cry and breathes his last. Mark still has three more accounts about the people who gathered around the cross, but these people are of a different character. After the death of Jesus, there is no mention of anybody who abused, mocked or reviled him. Those described now are the lovers and admirers of Jesus.

The first, found in Verse 39, is the centurion who was in charge of the crucifixion crew.

And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" {Mark 15:39 RSV }

This centurion was a pagan; he probably believed in many gods. Yet the cross brought him to a sobering awareness of the reality that what he was watching was not a joke after all -- that some ghastly mistake was being made in the crucifixion of this man. He sees that Jesus indeed is a royal personage, the Son of God, and this centurion, perhaps used to appearing in the presence of royalty, suddenly becomes aware of the true character of Jesus. Notice he speaks in the past tense -- this man was the Son of God. There is no hope here; there is no understanding that there may be help for him in the process. I think this is representative of many people today. Many people understand that God is at work in the death of Jesus. They understand that strange and mighty forces are being released in this remarkable event. They understand that he was more than a mere man, but it never gets further than that. They are impressed by the cross and impressed by the character of Jesus, but it never becomes personalized, and they never enter into the value of that death.

In Verse 40, Mark describes a great crowd of women who were gathered about the cross.

There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome, who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him; and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem. {Mark 15:40-41 RSV}

Isn't it a strange thing that around the cross of Jesus gathered this crowd of women. Where were the men? Where were James and John and Peter, with all his bluster, at this hour? John's gospel tells us that John had been there; he had been there with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and they stood at the foot of the cross. In those first three hours, Jesus had found time in the midst of his own suffering to commit his mother to the care of the disciple John. But evidently John was gone now. He had led Mary away, and all that was left around the cross was this crowd of women. Women -- they were the first to love Jesus and they were the last to stop loving him. That says something beautiful that I think is truly characteristic of women.

Are men and women simply human beings who are completely alike at the bottom, but simply come in two different models? That is a big question today, and I think this scene around the cross gives us a partial answer. Yes, there is a difference. The stark revelation of the clear light of the cross unveils exactly what is going on in human hearts. It reveals that women, who love first, who easily respond emotionally, also are able to maintain their love longer than men. This is a beautiful tribute to womanhood.

These women are not gathering around the cross in hope; they are gathering in hopelessness. This is a picture of hopeless commitment. It was the women who stayed with Jesus and tried to minister to his dead body, bringing spices to anoint him. The men were gone. There are many today who believe in God; they believe in the record of the Scripture. They believe that God is there and that he works -- until it comes to the exact moment of a crisis in their own life. Then their hope is gone. They really have no hope that God actually will act in the hour of despair. While their love remains, their hope and faith are gone. Their faith is strong as long as everything goes well, but when the bottom drops out, they still love, but their faith is gone.

Mark relates one final scene in Verses 42-47.

And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. And Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. And he bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud, and laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid. {Mark 15:42-47 RSV}

Here is Joseph of Arimathea, the secret disciple, a wealthy Sanhedrin of Jerusalem, looking for the Kingdom of God. He was attracted toward Jesus, but he was afraid to come out in the open. All through the record of the trial of Jesus, there is never any sign of Joseph. He doesn't raise his voice in the court where Jesus appeared before the Sanhedrin. But after the death of the Lord, when the body was hanging dead on the tree, Mark says Joseph took courage and finally stood up to be counted.

A lot of us are like that. We are willing to go along with our Christianity until it gets us into trouble or threatens us. Then we resist and we hide for a long time. But when the chips are down, we stand up and say, "Yes, I'm with him too." Thank God for Joseph, who at last found the courage to stand up for what he believed.

There are the hearts of the people around the cross, stripped of all pretense and cover. The cross always removes all hypocrisy and leaves us standing stark naked before God. In the midst of this, Mark lists these three climactic events:

First, the cry from our Lord in the last three hours, when a mysterious, strange darkness covered the face of the land. Emerging out of that darkness came what has been called "Emanuel's orphaned cry": "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabach-thani, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Second, almost immediately after the loud cry, Jesus dismissed his spirit -- he didn't die, he dismissed his spirit. He wasn't put to death, he gave up his spirit; he was obedient unto death.

Finally, a half mile away in the court of the temple, within the sacred enclosure of the holy place, the huge veil that marked off the holy of holies where only the high priest was permitted to enter once a year -- that great veil split from top to bottom. By an invisible hand it was torn apart and split wide open until the holy of holies was exposed to the gaze of the priest.

Perhaps one of the priests told Mark about the veil. But for sheer drama there is nothing like this in all of recorded history. This cry in the darkness of the cross, the dismissing of the spirit of Jesus, and the rending of the veil in the temple -- Mark brings them all together in order that we might understand what these events mean. As Jesus' cry rang out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" there must have been many in the crowd who recognized that it was the opening words of the 22nd Psalm. If you want to get the background and atmosphere of the cross, read that Psalm through. There is no adequate explanation for the question that Jesus asked except that which Scripture itself gives, notably in Second Corinthians 5:21, where Paul says, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

I don't think it's possible for any of us to even remotely understand the agony that wrung this tremendous cry from the lips of Jesus. If you can imagine a beautiful young girl, an innocent virgin, being raped by an ugly, foul, rapacious man, and the horror that she would feel in that moment, you aren't even in range of what was going through the soul of Jesus when he was made sin for us. You say, "I don't understand it." Well, join the club -- I am way beyond my depth in trying to explain anything about these events to you.

Then there comes the loud cry of dismissal and the rending of the veil. Why did the veil split in two? It was God's dramatic way of saying for all time and for all people that the way into his heart is wide open. God is not planning revenge. All those who gathered around the cross in hatred and malice against Jesus -- every one of them is welcome to come back. That is what the rent veil means. The penalty has been paid for the hateful, the cruel, the ignorant, the selfish, the empty-headed thrill seekers. The way is wide open and God is waiting to restore the hopeless, the helpless, the fearful.

When I was just a young Christian, in my early twenties, I read a message by D. L. Moody that I have never forgotten. It was the great evangelist's imaginative description of what happened after Jesus rose from the dead. Moody says he gathered his disciples in Jerusalem and said to them, "Men, I want you to go and find the priests who mocked me, who hurled in my teeth the taunt, 'He saved others, himself he could not save.' Explain to them that if I had saved myself, they would have been doomed men. But tell them there is a way wide open." The book of Acts says that as Peter and the other disciples preached in Jerusalem "a great company of priests were obedient unto the faith," {Acts 6:7 KJV}.

Moody said that Jesus said to the disciples, "Go find the soldiers who cast lots for my garments, for my seamless robe, and tell them that there is a far greater treasure awaiting them if they will come to me. They shall have not a seamless robe, but a spotless heart. All their guilt can be washed away; all their callous cruelty can be forgiven if they come. Find the centurion who thrust his spear into my side and tell him there is a closer way to my heart if he will come, just as a sinner needing forgiveness.

In this beautiful scene of the rending of the veil at the moment of the death of Jesus, God is saying that the way to him is open to us, despite the attitudes we so frequently have had toward him. As Charles Wesley expressed it in his hymn:

'Tis mystery all! Th'Immortal dies!
Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries
To sound the depths of love Divine!
'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,
Let angel minds inquire no more.
Amazing love! How can it be

That Thou, my God shouldst die for me.

Prayer:

Our Father, as we have looked at this wonderful scene of the cross of Jesus, many of us have felt ourselves to be there. We have recognized ourselves in these attitudes that were so prevalent around the cross; we have identified with them. We thank you for this marvel of grace, this wonderful love, that touches us when nothing else can. We pray that every individual here this morning will have come to the place where he or she personally appropriates the value of the death of Jesus on their behalf. We pray that they may lay hold, individually and personally, of that great word, "He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." We know of no greater mystery, no greater wonder in all the universe than this. As we have contemplated this supreme act in all the history of mankind, we pray we will never be the same again. But you, Lord Jesus, will reign supreme as king in our lives, and we will be willing to stand up and be counted. We ask in his name. Amen.

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