The Wonderful Cross

Mark 15:16-32
Key Verse: Mark 15:24
And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

The cross today is a symbol of help, hope and relief. It is not uncommon to see the image of the cross on hospitals. The International Red Cross is a relief organization that started in Switzerland in the 1800s to take care of military and civilians who had been wounded in war, regardless of nationality or religion. The origin of the symbol of the cross had to do with Christianity, and today, this symbol is universal across all of its denominations. Crosses are found in every church, and even in the Godbox at IIT, there is a large cross hanging on the main wall. This icon wasn't always the beacon of victory and salvation that we know of today though. In Jesus' time, just a little over 2,000 years ago, the cross was an emblem of suffering and shame. However, it was on a cross that Jesus carried out his most important work. When the fullness of time had come, the fulfillment of promises and prophecies over thousands of years culminated in the actions of Jesus on the cross which altered the course of history, and I would even say changed the universe. Even our calendars testify to this very fact when the years "Before Christ, BC" became the "Year of Lord, Anno Domini, or AD" We are living in the Year of our Lord, 2020 AD. So how did this emblem of a curse become a symbol of blessing? How did this wretched cross become the wonderful cross? We will see, as we are approaching the end of our study in the book of Mark.

Good Friday in the year 33 AD has arrived, and we are looking into the closing hours of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Last week, we learned about the trial of Jesus with Pilate, who tried to find out, who is Jesus, and learned that Jesus is the king of the Jews. The Jews vehemently denied this and rejected the claim. We learned that that while Jesus is the king of the Jews, he is so much more. He is altogether unlike us. We see ourselves in Pilate's weakness, Barabbas' rebellion and the crowd's rage, but not in Jesus' majestic calm. He really was a king, the commander in chief over the whole host of the armies in heaven, but he remained silent to stay on the course God marked out for him. The religious leaders rejected him, and wanted him dead. Their rage grew hotter and hotter, so that Pilate gave in to their demands. He condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion, and handed him over to be crucified. We will now look at Jesus' journey to the cross, and see why it is so important to all of us. Through this passage we will look at the shame of the cross, understand the necessity of the cross, and finally behold the wonders of the cross.

In the first place, let's see the shame of the cross. Barabbas, who was in prison for insurrection, was just released. He had taken part in an uprising against Rome, and committed murder. The insurrectionists were a nuisance to the Roman Empire, especially in this region of the Jews. It was a Festival time – the Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover, and around this time revolts could have been more frequent. It was probably not a fun time to be a Roman soldier in Jerusalem during these festivals. It's in this setting that we find Jesus in the hands of the Roman guard. Look at v.16, "The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called

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together the whole company of soldiers." Look who they have here – the king of the Jews. Their supposed Messiah, their leader, the one who according to legend would overthrow Roman rule and establish the primacy of the Jewish nation. It was in this vein that they would take our their stress and anger on Jesus. "Oh look who we have here, the king of the Jews. Oh, what're you gonna do, king of the Jews? You gonna overthrow us? Let's see about that." They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. They were making a mockery of Jesus. Jesus did nothing wrong, but they gave full vent to their hatred of another king, even if that king was God. They scornfully paid him homage, and over and over again they struck him with a staff and spit on him. Blood dripping from the wounds of the crown flowed faster, as they hit him, and mixed with their foul saliva as they spit on him.

This is no way to treat another human being, as our own common sense would tell us. Even if Jesus was not the king of the Jews. But the fact is, he was the actual King of the Jews, the Messiah, though nobody believed it. How much Jesus' heart ached and grieved, that the actual king of the Jews, was being mocked as the king of the Jews. It's as bad as someone who just hates you for who you are.

When they had finished mocking him, and probably when things were all ready and set up for the crucifixion, they put his own clothes back on him and led him out to crucify him. Here was another public procession of shame, with the criminals being paraded publicly and their convictions shouted out for all to hear. Look at v.21, "A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross." This is how bad Jesus was beaten and worn down. After the late night prayer at Gethsemane, Jesus was arrested and beaten with many blows, and then condemned. Then he was tried again before Pilate in the early morning, with not a wink of sleep in between. He was condemned again, and beaten, and now he seemed faint. Not wanted to delay the crucifixion, and wanting to make sure he was alive for the torture, the soldiers forced a stranger, Simon, to carry Jesus' cross.

See here the humanity of Jesus. He was the Son of God, infinite and eternal in power, but emptied himself and made himself nothing. He took on our flesh, with all of its weaknesses. It was customary for those being crucified to carry their own cross. Some scholars say it's around 40 lbs, others say around 75 lbs. In either case, it's quite heavy. I used to buy bags of rice at 25 lbs, but I just put them in the grocery cart. Jesus had to carry this thing about 1/3 of a mile, or 350 meters (maybe the length of 3-4 football fields). Not a huge distance relatively speaking, but to carry the cross for that length must be grueling. But notice here, although unbeknownst to Simon, he had a chance to participate in the sufferings of Christ. The Bible tells us we ought to do so, but here, Simon literally and actually participated in Christ's sufferings. Now, we can't take any glory, as if we helped Christ, but Christ should get the glory, by allowing us through his humility, to be a part of his work.

Look at v.22, "They brought Jesus to a place called Golgotha (which means 'the place of the skull')." This would be the site of his crucifixion. Goglotha is an Aramaic word, and from time to

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time you see Mark translating these words for us, as he was writing for a Roman audience. Interestingly, the Latin word for “Golgotha” is Calvary, which also means skull. So if you hear people say, “He died on Calvary,” it’s like saying “He died on Golgotha.” Calvary, like Golgotha, is the place of the skull, and the site of Jesus’ crucifixion. Before he was lifted up, he was offered some wine to drink, mixed with myrrh. This might have been given to some criminals to dull the pain, like some strong wine with some strong pain killers. Jesus however, refused it – it was his desire to feel every sting of pain he would go through, and it was about to get even more painful.

Look at v.24, our key verse: “And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.” Mark is very brief and efficient with his words. “And they crucified him.” No details, just facts. But perhaps he didn’t need to explain to his audience. Everyone knew what crucifixion meant. It was gruesome. It was brutal. It was terrible. Above all – painful. It was and perhaps still is the worst form of execution in history. It was designed the maximize the pain while the victim died a slow death. Nails were driven into the hands and feet, and pierced a main nerve, so every little movement caused a burning sting. The hanging made it hard to breath, so the person had to lift their body up against the nails to catch a breath. Many died from suffocation. And after being flogged, the exposed wounds on the back would rub and burn against that old rugged cross. Criminals were hung not to high off the ground, about 1-2 feet, so Jesus could hear all the mockery, taunting and insults that continued to be murmured or shouted out.

The soldiers who oversaw the execution usually had a right to take the belongings of the crucified, so here we see them gambling for Jesus’ clothes as he was dying before them. Physical pain was only one aspect of the anguish Jesus endured. There was emotional and psychological pain from the mockery and insults, and spiritual pain, which we don’t have much time to get into, but might be the most painful of them all. These pains would continue to build and escalate until he death.

Mark informs us the crucifixion happened at 9 in the morning, from here we can understand that Jesus got no rest from his arrest to his crucifixion, and now he is hung up there on the cross. Verse 26 says, “The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.” This was his crime – that he called himself the King of the Jews. Pilate may not have truly believed this, and he may have written that sign to scorn the Jews. He knew they hated Jesus’ claim. But unknowingly, Pilate was testifying to the world that Jesus is the King of the Jews, because that is who Jesus really is.

As if the mockery and the wounds weren’t enough, insult was added to injury. Look at v.27 “They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left.” The two other rebels may have been insurrectionists with Barabbas. Barabbas might even have been their leader. Whatever they had done, their crimes deserved the worst punishment. And Jesus is right there with them. But not only is he with them. Although he was the last to be condemned in this group, he was put in the middle. He was given the most prominent place, as if he were the worst of all the sinners. This was a shameful position to be in. On top of that, those who passed by hurled insults at him. People who didn’t even know him, people who just heard rumors, screamed at him. The chief

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priests and teachers of the law, the supposed shepherds of God's flock, the supposed servants of God, insulted him amongst each other. And to complete the total rejection of Jesus, even the criminals he was crucified with insulted him. Man, it's like getting ripped on by your own teammates – although he wasn't really on their team. The cross was so shameful, it was as if Jesus had been totally and utterly forsaken.

The shame of the cross starts with the condemnation, but includes the mockery, the insults and the torture that comes with it. We will see now how that is related to the necessity of the cross. The cross did not just "happen" randomly to Jesus. He was not caught up in the wrong place at the wrong time, where his enemies got a hold of him. The cross was God's will. It was God's plan from the beginning. It was where God wanted Jesus to go, and where Jesus willingly went in obedience to God. Jesus predicted his death three times in the book of Mark. He predicted his mockery, being spit on, flogged, and killed. 700 years before Jesus was born, Isaiah prophesied, "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer." 1000 years before Jesus was born, David wrote Psalm 22, which even Jews of the day considered to be describing the Messiah, and it accurately describes the scene of the crucifixion, and you can get an idea of what was going through Jesus' mind. So what is God's plan? What is his intention? The rest of Isaiah 53 tells us things like "making his life an offering for sin," "he will justify many and bear their iniquities," and "he bore the sin of many."

Jesus came to bear our sin, and to take it upon himself. That's why he didn't retaliate when he was mocked. That's why he didn't punch back when he was punched. That's why he didn't come down from the cross, although he may have been really tempted to do so. He came to bear our sin because he was the only one that could do so. No other person could do it. Forget the other religions for a moment, we are talking about real history. We are talking about a man who came from heaven, visited us over 2,000 years ago, and altered the course of history, with evidences that reverberate through time by dying on the cross. Jesus was the only one, because he had no sin. If he had any ounce of sin. If Jesus even had a COVID-19 sized virus of sin in his body, his punishment would have been just from God. He would have gotten the punishment he deserved for his sin, just like us, however large or small.

But Jesus had no sin, yet he took on our punishment. And he did not just take on our punishment the quick and easy way. No, he drank down the full dregs of the cup of the wrath of God. All of his sufferings, they are punishments from God, including death on the cross. Why do we say he was punished by God? Because he was innocent, yet God did not intervene. God let Jesus be mocked, God let Jesus be spit on, flogged and crucified, though he was totally innocent. You could say, Jesus was cursed. Perfectly innocent, but he was being totally punished, with no help from God at this time. Jesus did not deserve even a single punch to the shoulder, but he was inflicted with the severest of pains internally and externally. This is what our sins deserve. We should be having it, but Jesus is taking it on himself instead.

Some people might say, I can't believe in a God who is so cruel to let his own Son go through

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this. But God is not a cruel God, the one who says that is not aware of his own sins. God's heart must have been breaking to see Jesus go through so much pain – but God mercifully offered him up to take what we deserved. And not only did God offer him up, but Jesus was willing to make the sacrifice. Jesus was willing to give his body for us, to take all our hits. He was the only one who could do it. Why didn't Jesus talk back? Why didn't Jesus take the wine mixed with myrrh? Because he wanted to feel all of our pain, he wanted to taste every sting for us, so that it could be taken away. Sure, not all of us are rebels. Not all of us have committed murder. But Jesus suffered the worst of the worst, so he could be able to redeem all sinners, even the worst of sinners. Look now! Look again at Golgotha!! Look again at Calvary and the cross!! Who is there, in the middle, like the worst of sinners! I should be there! I could be there! But no, Jesus is there, not because he deserved it, because he took my place. Here is there on the cross, for you, and no matter how deep our sins have been, no matter how lost you are in pain and despair, Jesus has gone even deeper, so he could rescue you. The cross is the worst punishment any man could take, and Jesus took it for you. He took the worst, so he could do it once and for all. He was cursed. If you ever think you are cursed, just look at Jesus, he was cursed most of all, so he could turn your curse into blessing, because he loves you.

Look again at v.31, for even in their mockery, the teachers of the law speak a truth. "In the same way the chief priests and teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself.'" That's right. He saved others. That's what he came to do. And he can't save himself. Not that he did not have the power to, but he refused to, in order to save us. That's why the cross was necessary – so that we could be saved.

It was necessary that Jesus took on the shame of the cross in order to save us, but what does this salvation look like? We saw the shame of the cross, and learned of the necessity of the cross, and now briefly I want to close with the wonder of the cross. Jesus has turned the cross from a curse to a blessing. Before that, one could hardly imagine how the dying on the cross could do that. Paul says in 1 Cor 1, that Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God, and the wisdom of God is broken down into these 3 things: righteousness, holiness and redemption. These are the three wonders from the cross, and blessings of the cross we can receive. 2 Cor 5:21 says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Our sins are forgiven, and our guilt is no more, we have become like Jesus, the righteousness of God. Heb 10:14 says, "For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." Salvation begins now. Eternity begins now. He has healed your wounds, and cleansed your sins. You are made perfect forever, and holy, and in heaven you will become all that you were created to be, to the great glory of God. To be holy means to finally belong, and to belong to God. Never again will you be lonely or ever left alone. You are set apart, being sanctified, devoted and consecrated to God. That is holiness, and the work of perfection has begun. And finally, Gal 3:13 says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.'" To be redeemed means to be set free, to be liberated through a ransom price. Through the cross, we have been set free from sin and death. No longer are you under the power of sin, for Christ has set you free.

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What wonders await those who believe in Christ and his work on the cross!

The cross was once an emblem of suffering and shame, but through Jesus it has become a source of blessing, peace, hope and healing. O the wonderful cross! Look to the cross of Christ and be saved!

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