

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

I. In the Garden (Mark 14:32-42)

The time had come. It was for this reason that Jesus had been born. It was for this time that He did all that He did. Jesus did not come to be just an example or an encourager or to show us our potential - He came to be the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. He came to die.

But it would not be easy. How clear that is in these words! For though He was true God, yet also was He a true man, and so faced all the trials and troubles, the temptations and fears, all the struggles that we go through. And He was about to drink a cup that none of us could drink - the cup that contained the entire world's sin, the entire world's shame and disgrace, the entire world's rebellion and curse - from the greatest evils to our petty everyday sins. He would drink the cup of God's wrath and judgment against them all, all the way down to the dregs. Think of the fear we have of even *one* of our sins being found out. Jesus took them *all*. And at the thought of it He falls to the ground. Luke tells us *His sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground* (Luke 22:44). Agony.

And so what does He do? What does He do in the face of such an enormous sacrifice? He prays to His Father. He prays the prayer He taught us to pray, saying *Thy will be done*. And He is comforted. He is strengthened. No this will not be easy, but this is His Father's will, so it will be *good*. So He goes to be betrayed. He goes now to the cross. Not to lose His life, but to lay it down *for you*.

And notice, He prayed alone. He asked His disciples to watch and pray with Him, but they could not. How weak and tired they were! How weak and tired we often are in our prayers, too. But though Jesus prayed alone, you never do. For when you pray in His name, Jesus prays with you. And Jesus is praying for you, even now, even today. That in your trials and temptations, struggles, doubts, and fears, you not be alone. Your Saviour is with you. He knows them. He knows you. He knows how to help. And He does. The disciples let Him down. But He will never let you down.

II. Betrayal (Mark 14:43-50)

A kiss. One of the most intimate expressions of love we have . . . is used to betray the Lord of life. Judas could have picked another sign, *any* other sign. But Jesus is betrayed *with a kiss*.

This shows us how sin turns everything upside-down. What God creates good, man uses for evil. Wealth is turned into greed, sexuality is turned into adultery, authority is turned into dominance, love is turned into selfishness. God's good gifts are not used but abused. Even a kiss is turned into treachery.

But in this sinful, upside-down world, one stands out . . . because He is not upside-down, but right-side-up. Jesus does not act as we would. His actions are true and His words mean what they say. He is not deceptive and hides nothing, for darkness, hiding, and deception is the place of sin. He does not resist, for love only gives. And so Jesus gives Himself into the hands of the crowd. He gives Himself to fulfill the Scriptures. He gives Himself for you.

Now you too. In your baptism, in the forgiveness of your sins, Jesus has turned you right-side-up again. He has made you new, born again from above. To live no longer in sin, but in love. His love. That we stop drawing the sword against each other - the swords of hate and anger and bitterness and grudges and selfishness - but instead love. Loving those who hate us, praying for those who persecute us, and doing good to those who harm us. That sounds upside-down, doesn't it? :-) But is it? Or is it being right-side-up in an upside-down world?

III. Condemnation (Mark 15:1-15)

"A murderer they save, the Prince of Life they slay." That's how one of our hymns puts it (LSB #430 v. 5). Quite right. But why is Jesus the "Prince of Life?" Not only because He created all life, but because He has come to redeem all life; to give us our life back again. The life we gave up, forfeited, and handed over to the devil in sin, Jesus is here to give back to us again. To redeem us and raise us from the power of sin, death, and hell, and give us life again.

Pilate is amazed. Jesus is not fighting for His life. *Everyone* fights for their life! But not Jesus. No, He is fighting for *your* life. Your life too, Pilate. You are not His enemy. You will sentence Him to His death, but He has come to save you, too. There is nothing He wants more than to welcome you, Pilate, into Paradise, too.

For Pilate's not a bad guy. Not really. He's trying to do his job. His problem is that he has a divided heart. He wants to do what is right; he wants to set free this innocent man named Jesus - but he also wants his position, his power, his career, all that he has earned and worked so hard for. And in the end, that wins out. He hands Jesus over to be crucified. Did you get what you wanted Pilate? Really? Do you, when you follow your divided heart? Maybe for a while, but not in the end. Sin always takes away more than it promises.

But Jesus is here to give. His heart is not divided, but filled only with love. And so He is traded for a murderer. For Barabbas, yes, but not only Barabbas - but also for you. And me. Barabbas represents us. For Jesus has come to trade places with you. To take your sin, your cross, your punishment, your death, and set you free, and give you His forgiveness, His throne, and His life. Sin always takes away more than it promises, but Jesus always fulfills His promises, and gives us far more than we could ever imagine. That we live with divided hearts no more.

IV. Bearing the Cross (Mark 15:16-21)

What abuse did Jesus take! The King of all creation, the Lord of the universe, the God who gave these very soldiers their lives, now takes such abuse from their hands. An old, purple military cloak is thrown over His shoulders and back, so raw from flogging. A twisted crown of thorns is shoved down upon His head. He is struck and spit on and knelt before in harsh ridicule. For how long? We aren't told. Until the soldiers got tired of their game; then they led Him away to do their job.

And I wonder what the angels were thinking. Yes, the angels. They are always around the Son of God. Unseen, but always at the ready. They had to witness this! Or did they? Or did they hide their eyes rather than witness this sinful scene? They were ready to intervene - at just one word from their Lord! They would crush these insignificant little bugs, just like they had done with vast armies, as we are told in the Old Testament. But no. No word from their Lord. He will endure this. For He does not hate those doing this to Him, but loves them. He will bear these sins, too, on the cross. Just as He bears your sins and mine.

Then we are told of Simon of Cyrene. A modern-day Libyan, who was compelled to carry Jesus' cross. He was the father of two boys, Alexander and Rufus. Were they with him then? We're not told. Perhaps they were. Mark mentions them as if they were well-known; perhaps now leaders in the Christian community. If so, maybe it was because of what they witnessed here this day: their father carrying the cross of Jesus. What a burden? Or what an honor?

What about the cross in your life? The Scriptures tell us that we will also bear the cross; that God will life the cross on each of us. A burden? Or a gift? Surely both. For just as Jesus bore the cross in love, so He gives us crosses in love. Not to punish us, but to train us in the faith. To kill the old, sinful men in us, and conform us to the image of Christ. To work good in us and save us. Like Simon. Like Alexander and Rufus. Therefore let us, too, bear His cross in love.

V. Weeping and Mocking (Mark 15:22-32)

The Shepherd dies for sheep who love to wander. Another one of our hymns says that (LSB #439 v. 4).

They took His clothes and divided them. This loving God, who clothed His naked and shamed children in the Garden of Eden, and who clothes us now with His righteousness, would hang in naked shame upon the cross.

Then they hang the charge above His head: ***Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.*** Quite right. God was their true king. Though they rejected Him, He would not reject them. Us.

They mock Him. *You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!* But it was exactly in staying on the cross that Jesus was fulfilling His words. It was necessary for this Temple of God in human flesh to be destroyed, so that it could be raised three days later! He hadn't been talking of the Temple made of stone, but the Temple made of flesh and bone. And so by staying and dying, by not saving Himself, He is showing Himself to be the Christ, true King of Israel. For true kings serve, and serve He will. Not Himself, but you. And so He will stay on the cross. And so not gamble with our life and salvation, but secure it.

VI. Dying Prayer (Mark 15:33-36)

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Is that a cry of desperation, or a prayer of faith? It is a psalm. Psalm 22. And that whole psalm is about what is now taking place. Jesus is praying.

The forsakenness He is experiencing is very real. But, we must admit, a mystery to us. It is beyond our understanding how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can be one God, and yet at the same time, the Father forsake His only-begotten Son. It is beyond our understanding how Jesus can be forsaken by His Father, and yet at the same time pray: MY God, MY God. And know that it is true. Know it, with a perfect faith.

You know forsakenness. Others - friends, family - have forsaken you, have let you down, have broken their promises. How often have we done the same to them? But you do not know the darkness of being forsaken by God. Jesus endured it so that we never will. And we never do. Though it may seem at times as if we are forsaken of God, stricken, smitten, and afflicted by Him, we are not. Though it may seem at times as if God doesn't see our need, or care about our hurt, or hear our prayer -

He does. Though God sometimes tests us, He never forsakes us. We think He does because our faith is not perfect. But only Jesus endured this, for us, so now for us, is only the love and mercy of our heavenly Father.

That's why Jesus will not come down. He could have. *Easily*. As I said before, the angel army was at the ready. But no. In His moment of greatest need, He turns not to His own strength, but to the Word of God. For faith clings to the Word. He believes. And so we, too. Are you forsaken? No. It may seem like it, or feel like it, we do not believe these things. We believe the Word. He is forsaken, so we are not. And His Word is truth.

VII. Death and Burial (Mark 15:37-39, 42-46)

It is finished. Jesus' life, yes, but also the separation that sin had caused with God. The curtain in the Temple, symbolic of that, was torn in two from top to bottom. It was torn not just a little, but all the way. *There is now no condemnation* - no separation from God - *for those who are in Christ Jesus* (Rom 8:1). It is hard to say just how stunning that tearing must have been for the people of the day.

Did they understand that at first? No. Neither did Joseph, who does one last loving deed for Jesus. How heavy his heart must have been as they took Jesus' lifeless body down from the cross, wrapped Him, and laid Him in the tomb. That's always the hardest part - the last part, the laying our loved one in the ground. It is so final and there is nothing after that.

Or so it seems . . .

But we are here this day, remembering the death of our Lord, because we know that there is something after that! Jesus body will rest on the Sabbath Day - the last and final sabbath rest - but soon that tomb will be empty. He will rise to life again, victorious over sin, satan, death, and the grave! He will burst the bonds so powerful over us, and leave them tattered and destroyed in His resurrection. *Just as He said He would*.

And just as He promised, we, too, will rise from the dust of death. We, too, and all who die in faith, will rise victorious on the last day. For as Jesus went through death to life again, so will He take with Him all who belong to Him through death to life again. Our mourning will be turned into dancing, and our weeping into joy and praise.

So it is finished. All that is needed for our forgiveness, our life, our salvation has been done. Our Saviour has redeemed us and there is now nothing in all creation

that can separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:38-39). On this Good Friday, we remember that. On this Good Friday, we celebrate that. That this is not a day of defeat, but of victory. Sin, death, and hell have done their worst, but have lost - and we have won.

And so to our Saviour Jesus Christ, our Great Redeemer, be all glory, honor, and worship, now and forever, and unto the ages of ages. AMEN.